Summary

Rather than allowing Harry to stay at Diagon Alley after he blew up Aunt Marge, the Ministry sends Harry back to the Dursleys. Harry returns to school after a terrible summer, to find that he's not the only one with this kind of secret. A student has been killed by his family. New screening measures are put into place by the Ministry: Every student must be given a medical exam and interview to look for child abuse. With Dumbledore facing an inquiry, Snape is entrusted with the task of making sure EVERYONE receives one.

Answer to the "New measures for screening abuse" challenge at Potions and Snitches.

The first chapter contains a character death and the whole story is quite dark. It begins at the beginning of Prisoner of Azkaban and is AU thereafter. Also note: this story is a "Snape is Harry's biological dad" story. This is not supposed to be the central theme of the story, but people have gotten annoyed that I didn't tell them at the beginning.

Another note: There are no pairings in this story, or explicit sexual content. There are, however, mentions of homosexuality. Since there are no pairings, there is no slash content, but if the mere mention of homosexuality offends you, read something else.
Chapter 1

Home Again
Harry sighed with relief, as he wheeled his cart through the magical barrier onto Platform 9 ¾. At last, he was finally reaching the end of this horrific summer.

He hadn't been at all sure that he was going to make it through that last fortnight. Given the events of the last two weeks, he was very surprised that Vernon had actually consented to drive him to the train station. Two days ago, Vernon had told Harry he could find his own bloody way to the station. Last night, however, after Vernon and Petunia had had a hissed argument in the living room while Harry cleaned up after dinner, Vernon had come in to tell him that he would take him to the train station, "Since it's the only way to get shut of you." he'd snarled.

Harry didn't care in the slightest why the Dursley's brought him to the station, only that they did. Even Vernon's "going away gift" couldn't dampen Harry's spirits. Not that much, anyway.

Since the fiasco with Marge, Harry felt like he hadn't had a moments peace, except when he was locked up in his bedroom. Which was whenever he wasn't working. That was only for a few hours at night. More because Petunia needed her beauty rest (Harry reckoned she needed about a hundred years worth of that), and couldn't supervise Harry, than out of concern for Harry's state. If they could have worked out a way to keep Harry working all night, they would have.

The Ministry had, sadly, made it quite clear that accidental magics were to be expected from an energetic, young wizard such as Harry. Adolescent high spirits, they'd called it. Naturally, Petunia and Vernon decided that if they worked Harry hard enough, and fed him little enough, he wouldn't have any energy left for magic. Then too, Vernon had his own way to remind Harry of his place in the universe. Marge had been very helpful in giving Vernon tips on the proper ways to break Harry's willfulness.

For the thousandth time, Harry cursed himself for losing it, the night he had blown up Marge like a giant balloon. Privet Drive was, for some reason, under close scrutiny. The Accidental Magic Reversal Squad had been on hand, almost immediately, to put her right. They missed Harry though, who had packed up his trunk and inadvertently hailed the Knight Bus moments before.

It was several hours before anyone found Harry at Diagon Alley, the conductor of the bus helping him with his things. Harry had intended to go to Gringott's, withdraw every last knut from his vault, and then...well, he hadn't really planned that far. All he knew was that his life would be a living hell if he had to go back to the Dursley's

He tried to explain this to Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Auror who found him. Shacklebolt had seemed sympathetic, but he'd said that it wasn't safe for Harry to wander about unsupervised, even in the Wizarding World. He'd explained to Harry that there was some dangerous criminal dark wizard on the loose. That wizards needed to be more careful than usual. He seemed to imply that Harry, due to his stature as the Boy Who Lived, might be at more risk than average.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, escorted Harry back to Privet Drive. It had taken some fast talking on Fudge's part, but he had soothed the Dursley's ruffled feathers and had them agreeing to take Harry back.

The nasty glint in Vernon's eyes, told Harry that his assessment of the rest of his summer was not wrong.
Fortunately, Vernon was a master at not punishing Harry where it would show. Harry couldn't have
borne returning to school with the bruises and cuts he'd had right after he'd returned to Privet Drive.
Their nosy neighbor, Mrs. Figg, had asked some very awkward questions that first day back, when
Harry was mowing the lawn. Harry had to talk at some length with her, to assure her that he'd gotten
into a fight with some teenagers, when he'd run off in a huff the prior night.

Petunia had overheard the conversation and advised Vernon to stay away from the boy's face, in
future. She'd also given Harry an extra piece of toast that night. Harry wasn't sure if the extra food
was to help him heal faster, or a reward for throwing Mrs. Figg off the scent.

Uncle Vernon had used the cane more often, after that. On the theory that it left less actual damage,
while driving home the lessons that needed to be imparted.

Harry's back was on fire, this morning. Uncle Vernon had woken him at the crack of dawn to make
sure Harry understood what he would be returning to next summer. Harry had barely been able to
tolerate the ride to London. When they'd arrived at the station, Uncle Vernon had stopped long
enough to pitch Harry's things out of the car. Harry was very glad that Hedwig had had the sense not
to return to Privet Drive after he had let her go, telling her to head for Hogwarts, where she'd be safe.

Harry wrestled his trunk onto a trolley, navigated around the Muggles in the station and passed
through the solid-seeming brick wall that led to the platform. Much to Harry's pleasure, the first
person Harry saw when he came through the barrier was Ron. He was saying goodbye to his
parents. His brothers were already loading the luggage onto the train. Mr. Weasley was giving Ginny
a hug and Mrs. Weasley was hugging Ron tightly.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley cried, spotting him as she looked over Ron's shoulder. She gave Ron a final
kiss as he squirmed away from her, embarrassed. He turned to give Harry a smile. Ron was more
freckly than ever and his red hair looked sun streaked from his family's vacation in Egypt. He'd also
grown about a foot in the last two months.

Harry sighed inwardly, wishing he'd gained a few inches in the summer.

"All right, Harry?" called Ron. The twins turned to grin at Harry, too. Ginny gave him a shy smile

Harry grinned at them all in delight, deciding that his height didn't matter, his relatives didn't matter,
and his empty stomach could be taken care of shortly, so that didn't matter, "Yeah, fine. It's great to
see you!" Even before getting on the train, he felt like he had arrived home. He set his teeth and
didn't flinch when Mrs. Weasley hugged him.

"Well, all of you, hurry up." said Mrs. Weasley, holding her arms wide to guide them along like they
were a flock of chicks, "It's almost 11:00."

Fred and George grabbed Harry's trunk and hoisted it onto the train for him.

"Ron! Harry!" Hermione waved at them from the platform, hurrying to catch up. Fred and George
grabbed her trunk too. She smiled at the twins gratefully.

The twins returned the grin, and then ran off to the front to join their friend Lee, who had already
found them seats.

Harry yelped when Hermione gave him a hug. Hermione backed off to look at him questioningly.

"It's nothing." he assured her quietly. Fortunately, Ron still waving at his parents, "Uncle Vernon
had me doing all the yard work. I'm sore as hell. You just caught me wrong."
Hermione nodded reluctantly. Harry knew she had her suspicions, but what could she do?

Harry knew that the painful marks would be gone in a day or two, so all he really needed to do was avoid Hermione's more enthusiastic expressions of affection. She patted his hand and turned to hug Ron, next.

The three made their way down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment. Finally coming to one which was only inhabited by a shabby man who was asleep with his head against the window.

"Who's that?" asked Ron in a low voice, as they all took the empty seats in the compartment. They'd never seen an adult on the train, other than the witch who pushed the food trolley.

"Professor Lupin," replied Hermione, "He's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"How do you know that?" asked Harry, surprised.

"His name's on his suitcase." Hermione pointed at the inscription on the worn suitcase, Professor R. J. Lupin, "And Defense Against the Dark Arts is the only class that doesn't have a teacher."

"Go on then, be logical." grinned Harry, "I was enjoying the mystery."

The other two laughed and Ron pulled out a deck for Exploding Snap.

While they played, Ron told them what his dad had said about the search for the escaped criminal, Sirius Black.

The witch with the food trolley came. Harry bought one of everything, although most of the sweets he stashed in his trunk. Hermione had taught him a pretty cool stasis charm last year, and he was determined that he'd always have something to eat available. Stupid, he supposed, since he never went hungry at Hogwarts, but it went a long way to making him feel more secure.

He felt Hermione's gaze on him again, although Ron didn't seem to think about it. He just took it for granted that Harry's appetite must rival his own.

The door of the carriage opened, "Hermione?" called Neville, as he stood leaning against the door frame. He was pale, with deep circles under his eyes. His round face was a lot thinner than it had been when he left school last term. Harry noticed that he held himself curiously stiff. Almost as if he were guarding an injury.

He looked a bit like Harry felt, to be honest.

"Hi, Neville." chirped Hermione.

"Can I talk to you a second?" he asked, his face going red.

Hermione's eyebrows drew together in confusion, "Of course, but what..?"

Neville's eyes darted around as if he feared who would overhear, "I need help with a spell." he didn't seem keen on talking about it. Harry couldn't tell if it was because he and Ron were here, or if he was just uneasy in general. He took a deep breath as though steeling himself, and came into the compartment. He sat gingerly next to Hermione.

"Do you know any healing spells?" he asked. His voice sounded strained, and Harry noted that he didn't lean against the back of the seat.

"Not really, no." replied Hermione, "Potions work much better for that sort of thing. Have you hurt
"Fell down some steps," replied Neville, quickly. Too quickly, for Harry's comfort. Neville didn't meet their eyes as he spoke, either, "You know how I am." he went on, still in that strained voice, "I was hurrying to get the post. I was waiting for some letters. My Gran was supposed to owl me before I left for school, since she had to be away this morning, and I tripped on the rug. Just fell headlong. And the owl wasn't even there yet, I found out. Anyway, I'm all bruised up. My Uncle brought me to the station, and he's not that good with healing charms. He said I should just let Madam Pomfrey take care of it when we get to school. I guess, he thought I was just being dramatic, but some of these bruises are really painful." He pulled up his sleeve to show the red, black, purple and blue marks on the underside of his arm, "Anyway, I was hoping you knew a good healing charm, Hermione." Neville finished.

Hermione and Ron nodded sympathetically, but Harry's stomach tightened uneasily. Something about what Neville was saying felt...off.

"You should have Madame Pomfrey look at it, when we get there," Hermione was saying, "We won't be long." it had grown quite dark over the last hour, a steady rain extinguishing the afterglow of the sunset.

I think we're there, actually," said Ron. "We're slowing down."

"No, it can't be." said Hermione, looking at her watch, "There's another half hour..."

As she spoke, every light on the train went out.

"What was that?" said Neville's voice, panicky.

"Have we broken down?" asked Ron's voice.

"I'm going to talk to the driver." said Hermione.

"Ow. That's my foot." said Harry, pulling them back.

They heard the sound of the door sliding open, then, "Ow."

"Hermione?"

"Ginny?"

"I came to find Ron."

"Well, come in and sit down."

"What do you think..?"

"Quiet." Said a hoarse voice. It was their sleeping companion, apparently awakened by the disturbance. "Calm down." He said in a firm tone

There was a little crackle of sound, then the man's face was illuminated by flames he seemed to be holding in his hands, "Let me go find out what's wrong."

Before he had a chance to move two steps, however, the compartment door slid open again.

A tall figure in a cloak stood there, blocking the way. It had the shape of a human being, but Harry knew, instinctively, that it was not even close. Resting on the door frame, a slimy, scabbed hand was
visible from underneath the cloak. It was white and rotted looking, as though the thing standing before them was already dead, and had been pulled up from beneath a lake.

The Thing took a long, rattling breath, tasting the air. Sucking in some vital quality.

Every bit of warmth seemed to be pulled from Harry's body, with that breath. White fog swirled up inside his head, chilling his thoughts, drowning him.

A woman's screams echoed through the fog. Where was she? Harry wanted to find her. To go to her. To help her. But the white fog surrounding him was freezing his limbs, motionless.

"Harry" Ron's voice was urgent, as though he had called Harry several times already, "Come on Harry, wake up!"

Harry blinked. Why was he on the floor? Where was the woman? "Who was screaming?" he muttered.

He could see Ron, Hermione and Ginny, in a circle around him. Their faces pinched with concern.

"That was Neville," said Hermione, very quietly. "That thing came in, and it was like it made you have some kind of fit. You went all rigid and fell over. But Neville..." she trailed off, upset.

Harry struggled up, "What happened to Neville?" the screaming Harry heard had sounded like a woman, but perhaps Harry had only assumed it was. He pushed himself back up onto the bench.

"I don't know." said Ron. He was so pale that his freckles stood out in stark contrast to the rest of his face. "Neville took one look, staggered backwards and screamed. He collapsed. Professor Lupin told the thing 'None of us have Sirius Black under our cloaks'. He pointed his wand and shot silver stuff at it and it went away."

"He checked you and Neville." Ginny took up the story, quietly. She was unwrapping something in her hand. "He said you weren't in any danger and we should give you this when you came around." She held out the thing she'd been unwrapping. Harry recognized it as a bar of chocolate, "When he checked Neville..." Ginny glanced uncertainly at Ron and Hermione. "He was upset about something. He picked up Neville like he didn't weigh anything. I think he took him up front." She snapped off a piece of chocolate and shoved it into his hand, "We've all already had some. It helps."

The four of them didn't speak for a few minutes. Harry stared at the chocolate in his hand, not eating it until Hermione said, "Harry, eat. It does help."

Harry bit into the chocolate and was surprised to find that warmth spread through him, all the way to his toes, "Did Professor Lupin say what those things were?" Harry asked, finally feeling up to talking.

"They're Dementors, he said," answered Hermione, in a low voice, "They guard Azkaban. They must have been looking for Sirius Black."

When the train arrived at the station in Hogsmeade, the four of them were still subdued, and rather shaken. They were not the only ones, everyone was talking in low voices about the Dementors. Harry looked around for Professor Lupin and Neville, but they seemed to have gone up to the castle already.

The teachers were strangely tense at the welcoming feast. Professor McGonagall was late. She marched into the hall after the first years were already standing in a loose grouping around the three legged stool that the Sorting Hat sat on. Harry noticed her glance at Dumbledore and give him a
Harry looked up and down the Gryffindor table, realizing that Neville had not joined them. How bad could it be that Neville had to miss the feast? Harry looked at the teacher's table. Three chairs were empty, Madam Pomfrey's, Professor Snape's and Madam Sprout's. Professor Lupin was there, sitting next to a very grave looking Dumbledore.

After the Sorting, Dumbledore stood. He gave a very serious speech about the Dementors that were guarding the school and how dangerous they could be. Harry barely heard him, as preoccupied as he was with his own discomfort, now that the adrenaline of the events on the train was wearing off. He ate as much as he could manage, knowing that he had a lot of weight to gain and he needed the calories to heal. He avoided eating to discomfort though, knowing from experience that if he stuffed himself tonight, it would only come back up. He'd been living on dry toast and cold tea every morning for the last two weeks, so he reckoned bread and potatoes wouldn't disagree with him. He made sure to butter his bread heavily and put extra on his potatoes as well.

Professor Snape had finally returned to the table, but now McGonagall was gone. Snape looked terrible. His normally sallow face was completely colorless. His face was an impassive mask, determined not to let what he was feeling show. He looked like a man who had just heard news of a grave illness or the death of a friend, and was determined to bear up underneath it.

He whispered to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore stood very quickly. The room went silent, waiting for him to say something. For a moment, it seemed that he had forgotten where he was. Snape touched his sleeve, as if to remind him. Recovering, Dumbledore said, "You will have to excuse me. A matter of grave importance calls me away." he strode out of the door with Snape beside him, his silver and blue robe billowing beside Snape's black.

A little while later, Professor Flitwik dismissed them to go to bed. Harry was very grateful. He wasn't sure how much longer he could act normally. The other students were very interested in whatever little drama was happening with the teachers, but Harry was only interested in bed.

Neville was still conspicuous by his absence. His trunk was at the end of his bed, untouched. Trevor the Toad was forlornly (or so Harry imagined) sitting on his rock on Neville's bedside table.

Harry showered quickly and was in his pajamas and in bed before the other boys had come up. Harry didn't want to explain the many bruises covering his body.

Something occurred to Harry suddenly. He looked at the almost healed bruises on the underside of his forearms. Those were the ones he had received from Uncle Vernon when he was protecting his chest from being struck with Dudley's Smelting Stick. The bruises Neville had shown him had looked very similar.

Harry resolved to ask Neville about it in the morning, before drifting off to the first decent sleep he'd had in weeks.

The next morning at breakfast, Harry noticed that, again, Madam Pomfrey, Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, and Professor Snape were missing. Flitwik was gone this time too.

The teachers who were there were completely silent. Hagrid was wiping his eyes with a gigantic handkerchief. One teacher, a woman with enormous glasses that made her look like a giant insect, that Harry hadn't seen very often at breakfast, was absolutely grey and shaking with what looked like shock. Madam Hooch had her arms wrapped around the Arithmancy professor, who appeared to be
Harry slowly put his head in his hands, breathing harshly. He heard Hermione sobbing beside him. Ron put his head down on the table, on the other side of him.

Severus Snape sat quietly, next to the body of one of his least favorite students. He and Minerva had spent the night by the boy's side. Minerva, because she was head of the boy's house, and Severus, because he had been assisting Madam Pomfrey. Now he was tired. He sipped the tea a house elf had brought him, waiting for the headmaster to return to take over the vigil over the body.

He glanced again at the body whose face they had covered, not half an hour ago. The child had been slipping away since midnight. The internal bleeding and damage to his organs was too much for the boy's magic to repair quickly enough to keep him alive. Severus and Poppy suspected a spell was used as well. Or perhaps the encounter with the Dementor, in his weakened condition, had sent him into a type of magical shock. It surely didn't help that Lupin had had to Apparate with boy to the Apparition boundary, just beyond the gates.

The man's Patronus had appeared in the staff room, demanding the presence of the Headmaster and Madam Pomfrey. They found him carrying the boy, already almost to the castle steps. Snape shuddered at the show of the wolfish speed and strength that Lupin usually kept very well hidden.

"Severus?" Professor Sprout peeked around the curtains, "Might I join you?" She was exhausted, as well. She had spent the night attempting to use different obscure magical plant remedies.

Severus waved a hand in the direction of the empty chair.
"I will miss him." she sighed.

"I know, Pomona." replied Severus, heavily, "I know you were fond of him." Guilt twisted up in his chest, unlike myself, went the unspoken thought between them.

"I had hoped he would want a Herbology Apprenticeship when he finished school." She sighed. Severus eyebrows rose, in spite of himself.

Pomona smiled sadly, "He was very good with plants."

"I didn't know that," sighed Severus, "There was a great deal I didn't know about Mr. Longbottom."

Including crucial facts: like that the boy's clumsiness was caused by nerve damage in his dominant hand. The fact that the boy's irritating cowering was caused by the expectation that blows would follow any raised voice. His inability to follow directions coming from the need to pay attention to where the next threat was coming from, rather than his lessons. His constant daydreaming a result of dissociation.

Severus stood, suddenly feeling that sitting there one more minute was intolerable. He paced back and forth a few times.

"Augusta will be here any minute." Poppy Pomfrey came around the curtain, to tell them quietly, "I suggest that you both get some sleep. Albus, Minerva and I will stay with her. When they're gone, I'm going to get a few hours myself, and we'll organize the exams for tomorrow morning."

"How many healers can St. Mungo's lend us?" asked Severus.

Poppy sighed, "They can lend us ten, until the end of the week."

Severus made some mental calculations, "Is it just the three of us," he indicated Pomona, "Who are qualified to do the exams?"

Both Severus and Pomona had certifications in medi-wizarding, due to the natures of their respective fields. They both needed to be able to do diagnostic charms and basic medical care.

Poppy nodded.

Pomona rubbed her eyes tiredly, "I'm going to go have a sleep, then."

"I, as well." Severus nodded gravely to the two women. He glanced at Longbottom's body one last time.

Poppy patted his arm as he left. To someone who didn't know him better, he would have seemed unconcerned. Poppy, however, had known the man for more than half his life and knew that behind his icy facade he was experiencing shock and grief as deep as anyone's. He paused for a moment to grasp her hand.

As always, it was easier to put aside his feelings and carry on with planning. In this case, Severus had to plan on how to get nearly a thousand adolescents, some of whom might be very resistant, to speak with a healer or a medi-wizard or witch about their home lives. They would all need thorough exams and interviews. It was going to be a veritable nightmare.

Worse yet, this was all to be handled by Severus, because Minerva and Albus were both helping Augusta Longbottom plan for her grandson's funeral, since she had been cleared of charges under
the influence of Veratiserum.

After that, they were facing an inquiry by the Board of Governors.

According to the Legillimancy that Severus had used on the boy before he died, it had been the boy's uncle who had perpetrated the assault. Apparently because the boy's magic was never strong enough to please the man.

Severus shuddered. Longbottom had been terrified of Severus' intrusion into his thoughts. It had taken some time to get the boy to stop fighting, and just give up the memories. Then, the spark that had been Neville Longbottom had shivered and dimmed, finally falling off into darkness. Severus had come back to himself, staring into a pair of dead eyes.

"Stop it." He said, harshly, aloud to himself, banishing the vision from his mind. He had not felt this weight of guilt since Lily's death. He had not liked the boy, no, but he had not seen what he should have. He should have seen the signs, pointed them out to Minerva or Poppy, or even Albus.

He knew, better than anyone, what Longbottom's particular malady looked like.

He hurried to his quarters, before anyone could waylay him. A sleeping draught had his name on it, and after that, he faced a long week.
Aftermath

The rest of the day was grey and cold, as if to underline the general mood of the castle inhabitants. Any other time, the students would have been thrilled with the prospect of an unexpected holiday. Now Harry felt their idleness gave them too much time to dwell on their thoughts.

All of the Gryffindors were going to be called to speak with the Aurors one by one. They wanted to know about Neville. What Neville said about his home life, if there were any suspicions among them. Harry remembered Neville telling the story of his uncle dropping him out of a window when he was little, trying to scare some magic out of him. There were a few other stories like that—all involving the same uncle.

Harry noticed with irritation, that many of his housemates were claiming closer relationships with Neville than he’d ever observed them having. Lavender had almost been going around claiming unrequited love for him, until Ginny called her a stupid cow in front of the whole common room. It was the first time Ginny had actually said anything that Harry had heard since the announcement. But, fair play, Ginny had been quiet around Harry for as long as he’d known her. He did think he remembered Neville helping Ginny with her Herbology homework.

Soon after Dumbledore had finished his speech, Hermione had gotten up from the the table and walked out of the Hall alone, without a word to either of them. Ron and Harry hadn’t even realized she was gone for a while, wrapped as they were in their own shock.

When Harry and Ron went to look for her before lunch they naturally searched for her in the library, after they ascertained she was not in the tower. They found her, in the very back of the library, in an alcove she favored for its privacy. She wasn’t reading though, she had her face in her hands.

“Hermione?” said Harry, quietly, not wanting to sneak up on her.

“What?” she said, sharply. She didn’t move, didn’t take her hands away from her face.

“Uh, we thought, maybe, you might want to get some lunch?” Ron said, uncertainly.

“No.” Hermione said into her hands, “I’m not hungry. ” her voice was flat and hoarse.

Harry shrugged helplessly at Ron.

“I...well...we’ll be at lunch...” Ron said, nervously, “If, you know, if you need us.”

Hermione nodded into her hands. Harry and Ron headed up to the Great Hall, not knowing what else to do.

“This is horrible.” said Ron in a low voice. Harry nodded in agreement. The hall was half empty and those who were there, were subdued. Even the Slytherins were looking depressed.

“What about all this medical exam stuff?” Ron asked Harry as they sat down, “Do they really think there’s others who’ve had family beating on them?” It seemed to Harry that Ron gave him a long, speculative look.

Harry rubbed his arm uncomfortably, “I dunno, maybe.” Harry was nervous about that. He’d never
had a proper medical exam. Madam Pomfrey had fixed him up when he’d injured himself, but he 
wasn’t sure this was going to be the same kind of exam.

Ron started loading up his plate. Harry couldn’t see anything on the table that he could stomach 
eating. He settled for taking some bread and buttering it heavily again. He put a lot of milk and 
sugar into his tea. He glanced at the teacher’s table. Most of them were gone.

Harry sat, thinking again about the bruises he’d seen on Neville’s arm. His weren’t anywhere near 
that bad.

The Dursleys were horrible, of course, but they couldn’t be considered abusive, could they? That 
seemed a little over the top. Anyway, Vernon only got ugly once in a while. Most of the time, he 
just shouted at Harry. They hadn’t even locked him in the cupboard since he’d been to Hogwarts. 
This summer had only been bad because of what happened with Marge. It wasn’t as if any of the 
Dursleys would permanently injure Harry. Not like what happened to Neville.

A dull pain ached in Harry’s chest. He’d fed Neville’s toad that morning, as the poor thing sat 
patiently waiting for the master who would never return for him. He’d have to ask Professor 
McGonagall what she was planning to do with him.

Oh, but McGonagall was gone right now. Harry wondered who was stepping in for her.

The questions in his head just kept coming back to the obvious matter. How could Neville had lived 
with them for two years and no one noticed? Harry racked his brain, examining every interaction 
he’d ever had with Neville.

It seemed he wasn’t the only one wondering this. Little snippets of conversation drifted to him, that 
all seemed to be about that very subject. Dully, Harry looked around the great Hall. Fred and 
George were sitting a little ways down the table. He thought they’d been looking towards him, but 
they were in deep conversation with each other about Neville. He heard one of them saying, “And 
don’t forget about the nightmares Ron says he’s always had.”

Harry did remember Neville’s nightmares. A few times last year, when Harry couldn’t sleep, he’d 
had to wake a muttering, tossing Neville out of one. Harry hadn’t realized Ron woke up in the night 
to witness them, as well.

George (he was wearing the sweater with the “F” on it–they almost never wore the right sweater,) 
glanced up and saw Harry. He gave Harry a wan smile. They’d both finished their meal and were 
getting up to leave, “All right, there, Harry?” he asked as they passed. They both wore an identical 
expression of worry and upset.

“Yeah, fine,” Harry said. He felt the same way, really.

The other topic of conversation Harry heard were these new “Screening exams”. Some of the 
murmuring sounded outraged, “My mother’s going to go mad to hear that the schools accusing Pure 
Bloods of child abuse!” Harry heard one Ravenclaw boy say haughtily to another, as they walked by 
him.

Some of the tone sounded fearful, wondering who was going to do the exams and how they were 
going to be accomplished. Percy, Ron’s older brother, was sitting a few feet down the table. He had 
been appointed Head Boy this year, and as such, students hoped the teachers had given him new 
information. Two first years were apparently driving him to distraction with these question, “I know
as much as you, and I'll thank you to let me eat in peace.” he snapped at them.

It also seemed that people were discussing other students, in light of who might turn out to have a bad home life. Harry noticed, with a sort of morbid interest, a little tableau that was repeated at least three times while he sat there; a student would walk past a knot of whispering people, who would fall silent. When the student in question passed them, the group would then poke each other, nodding and and making shh-ing noises and gestures.

Harry recognized the signs, since he had been the subject of so much gossip and speculation last year. It was a relief (although Harry hated to admit that there was anything good about today) not to be in the middle of that.

Finally deciding that he’d spent long enough picking at his food, Harry finished his tea and gave up lunch as a bad job, “I’m going to head back up to the Tower,” he told Ron.

“Yeah, okay. See you in a bit.”

It wasn’t too long later, when a general announcement was made that all students should return to their common rooms. Snape’s magically magnified voice said that heads of houses would be arriving shortly to explain the procedures for the following days.

“D’you suppose McGonagall’s back?” someone asked.

Harry had claimed one of the chairs near the window and was trying to get some of his summer homework done. He hadn’t dared sneak his belongings out of the cupboard under the stairs after Fudge had returned him to Privet Drive. This meant he was very behind.

Harry had ordered most of his new books by owl, yesterday, taking the order form up to Hedwig in the owlry after he was supposed to be in bed. He hoped they’d get here before classes resumed, it would mean answering a lot of embarrassing questions otherwise. Fortunately, his school clothes still fit him and Aunt Petunia had given him a few pairs of jeans that were too small for Dudley to wear that almost fit Harry. Harry thought they might have been Dudley’s when he was about eight.

Harry went back to working on his History of Magic essay. At least this term he wasn’t going to have to turn it in late.

Over the next fifteen minutes, the common room filled up as people came in through the portrait hole and down from the dormitories. Harry saw Ron and Hermione come in together. Hermione’s face was blotchy, but tearless. The twins came in behind them, still with that uncharacteristically serious expression. One of them said something to Ron who nodded.

Harry waved to Ron and Hermione, assuming they couldn’t see him. Hermione touched Ron’s arm and they walked over to him.

“All right?” asked Harry.

Hermione nodded, not speaking and not meeting his eyes. She sat at the table, propping her chin on her hands.

Ron sat next to her, looking dispirited, “Hi, Harry.”

Harry wanted to ask what was wrong, but that was stupid. He wanted to say something, anything.
There just didn’t seem anything to say.

The portrait hole opened again, and in walked Professor Lupin. He was still looking grey and tired. Now that Harry had a chance to really observe the man, he saw that his robes though clean, were quite worn looking.

“If I might have your attention?” he said, loudly enough to be heard over the general mutter.

The room quieted immediately.

“Professor McGonagall has owled us that she will be away for several days at least, so she has asked me to stand in for her. I realize this is not an ideal way for us to meet...” the man’s jaw tightened as he said this. Harry thought that it must be hard for him; the man had been the one to discover how injured Neville was, without even teaching a single class. The professor swallowed and took a deep breath, “I will be explaining the procedure for these new screenings.”

He held up a stack of parchment, “We’ll be doing the examinations alphabetically, by year. Each of you has a sheet here, with the time and day of your appointment. Please keep the appointment, as the healers from St Mungos are only being lent to us for the week. It will be a painless although fairly extensive exam. It should take between a half hour to forty-five minutes.”

One of the first years raised her hand. Lupin pointed to her, “You had a question?”

“Do we have to get shots?” she asked, nervously. Harry remembered that this one was Muggle-born. Harry had gotten a few shots in primary school when the health nurse came around. Harry remembered the nurse being rather annoyed that Harry hadn’t gotten any before then.

“No,” said Lupin firmly, “This is merely a screening exam. If any treatment is indicated, the healers will set it up for another time.”

“Now, another concern,” Lupin went on gravely, “This exam is screening for mistreatment, but like everything, it is not infallible. You know each other, much better than the teachers ever could know you. If you have any fears regarding your housemates, it is imperative that you notify one of the staff. My office door is always open, as are the doors of any of the professors. Please don’t think that you are being in any way disloyal by sharing this sort of information. Quite the contrary. We cannot help where we don’t know the need.”

Lupin looked around at them seriously, “I will leave you to your afternoon. Please present yourself to the infirmary in time for your appointments.” he handed the stack of folded papers to Percy, who puffed himself up importantly and started calling people by name to receive their parchments, and left the room.

When Percy had called “Granger, Hermione.” Hermione went forward and took her parchment, then went out the portrait hole, without a word to Harry or Ron.

“Where’s she gone?” asked Harry.

“Library, I expect.” said Ron, quickly, “You want to play some chess once this is done?”

“Potter, Harry.” called Percy. Harry went to get his parchment.

“9:00 Friday, September 3.” The parchment read.
Harry had a weird hollow feeling as he read it. He remembered Vernon, the night Fudge brought him back to Privet Drive ranting about how no one believed Harry’s whinging and he’d just have to take what was coming.

This had happened in primary school once. One of the teachers had gotten upset that Harry had limped into school one day and notified the nurse. The nurse notified the Dursleys and then examined him herself. Of course, by the time she looked, it had already healed, Harry supposed magic made Wizards heal much faster than Muggles. Petunia had been furious at the nurse contacting her. Harry hadn’t eaten at home for a month--Petunia was claiming some kind of allowance for his school lunches or Harry was sure he wouldn’t have had those.

Harry crumbled up the parchment and stuck it in his pocket, deciding that there was no way he was going through that again. If he skipped it and went on Monday instead, the marks Vernon had inflicted would already be gone. Even better, Lupin had said the healers would only be there that week. Perhaps he could dodge it altogether.

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“Well, the students should all have received their appointment times by now.” Severus Snape said, looking around the staffroom to see affirmative nods, “Does anyone have any questions on procedure?”

The teachers shook their heads. It was one of the most muted staff meetings they’d had in Severus’ whole time at Hogwarts. He was not comfortable being the one to run it, but Dumbledore had left him in charge because he was the head of house most able to function through the aftermath of Longbottom’s death.

He chided himself for the euphemism. Longbottom’s murder, then.

“Then, I think we can adjourn until tomorrow morning? I have a great deal to do tonight and I’m sure all of you do, as well.” He finished, tiredly. Four hours of sleep was just not enough.

“Severus?” Lupin said as the rest filed out, “A word?”

“What, Lupin?” asked Severus, too tired to even sneer.

“Three Gryffindors have come forward to me, saying they have concerns about a fellow student. I told them to meet me in my office before dinner. Given that I don’t know them at all...”

Severus sighed heavily, “Quite right, I suppose. Although, I hardly think Gryffindors would speak to me any more freely.” Severus considered asking Poppy to speak with them. But no, he was acting headmaster and as such it fell to him, “Which students?”

“Hermione Granger.” Lupin began.

Severus couldn’t help but roll his eyes, “Of course, it is.” he muttered.

“Fred Weasley and George Weasley.” Finished Lupin, ignoring Severus.

That was interesting.
“Who is the student they were concerned about?” Severus asked.

“They wouldn’t say. I think they were afraid that they were likely to get their friend in trouble.” replied Lupin.

Severus thought about who it could be. Perhaps Jordan? Or one of the girls in Granger’s dorm? He went through all the students that he thought Granger and the Weasleys’ might have in common. They were all from decent homes...

That thought stopped him cold. The Longbottoms were not just a “decent” family, they were considered of the highest quality in the Wizarding World.

“All right, Lupin, I’ll come with you.” Severus said shortly.

As they walked down to Lupin’s office, Lupin sighed pensively, “This isn’t the first time child abuse has been missed at this school.” he said softly.

Severus felt his insides turn cold. Surely, she had never betrayed his trust? “What do you mean by that?” he asked in a low, dangerous voice. His hand was on his wand, ready to Obliviate Lupin into idiocy, if necessary.

“Oh, come now, Severus,” replied Lupin, apparently not registering the other wizard’s outrage, “You knew the Blacks. I know you were friends with Regulus. I’m sure you heard about their father.” :Lupin shuddered, “And their mother.”

Severus relaxed, silently apologizing to Lily’s spirit for thinking so ill of her, “Yes, I believe I did.”

“I’ve always thought that that’s what drove Sirius over the edge. I wonder if joining the Voldemort was a way of trying to gain approval from his parents. A way to return to the Black family, with honor.” Lupin seemed to have forgotten who he was talking to, “I can’t imagine why he did what he did otherwise.”

“Yes, well, we have more immediate concerns here.” Severus was duty bound to hear out the Gryffindor students, but he would be damned before he became the wolf’s counselor.

Lupin shook himself, “Yes, of course.”

The three students were lurking just inside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. A look of complete panic flashed across the Granger girl’s face, as she saw who was with Lupin. The twins seemed of sterner stuff, though. They merely looked mildly queasy.

Lupin invited them to sit around a table he conjured. Perhaps feeling (rightly) that his office proper would be too small a space. He flicked his wand and closed the door.

Severus sat down, trying to look less foreboding, “You had something you wished to tell us?” He cursed to himself, he hadn’t meant that to sound so short.

“Yes...you see, sir...” Granger started, fidgeting maddeningly, “I wanted to tell you that...well, I’m not sure, really, but he’s got so much in common with Neville that I thought...Every time the sleeve on his robe slides up, he’s got the exact same kind of marks and I’ve been worried for a long time about it...He never goes home for holidays, either and they don’t feed him properly...” her eyes
began to fill with tears and she ceased her babbling, trying to get a grip on herself.

Severus closed his eyes, it would not do to shout at the girl, as much as he wanted to. Instead he took a deep steadying breath, opened his eyes and focused on the Weasley twins, “Perhaps you gentlemen could enlighten me as to who Miss Granger is referring too?”

One of the boys (Severus had given up trying to tell them apart three years ago), took a deep breath, “Harry.” he said.

“I beg your pardon?” Severus stared blankly at the boys, looking for any sign of a prank. He couldn’t see any of their usual tells. No upturned quirk of the mouth, or nervous fiddling with their wands. Nor did they have the deadpan expression of someone trying to hide their feelings. The three of them looked worried, sad and deadly earnest.

But that was mad, “Potter?” Severus demanded, “Has he been whining that his Muggle relatives are not worthy of Famous Harry Potter’s presence?”

Granger winced and cowered at his tone, but the twins looked mutinous, “Harry never talks about his relatives.” the other one said flatly, “But we broke him out of his room last year. They’d put bars on his window and they’d locked him into his room with about a hundred locks. There was a cat flap on the door and they’d been starving him.” he said firmly.

Lupin opened his mouth to say something, but Severus glared him into silence, “What do you mean ‘starving’ him?” Severus asked slowly.

“We mean a can of Muggle soup once a day, shared between himself and his owl.” said one of the boys stoutly, “He told us that much, when we first picked him up.”

The other one chipped in, “He shut up about it after, though. Like he thought he said too much.”

“And when he got on the train this year, I couldn’t hug him without him yelping. I think they really hurt him.” put in Hermione, finally able to talk without tears, it seemed.

“It is not unusual for Muggles in rough neighborhoods to install bars on their windows for protection, you know.” Lupin jumped in. “They don’t have alarm charms or security spells.” He seemed almost pleading.

“Not just on one window, Professor Lupin.” replied Hermione, “And not on an upstairs bedroom window. That couldn’t be opened from the inside. If there had been a fire, he wouldn’t have been able to get out.”

Severus scoffed, “It would be a poor wizard, indeed, who died in a simple, non-magical fire.”

“Yeah, but the Muggles don’t know that, do they?” said one of the Weasleys. He nodded at Hermione, “She told us that Muggles have all sorts of rules for buildings because they’re afraid of being trapped in fires.”

“And where is the other Mr. Weasley?” asked Severus, “Surely, he has something to say?”

Hermione went very red, “He’s keeping Harry busy. Harry would be furious if he knew we were here.”
She didn’t add, “Talking to you.” but Severus could hear it, hovering in the air.

“Thank you for the information, Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley. Would you mind putting your observations in writing?” If this were a prank or joke, Severus wanted documentation in the students’ own hand.

“Yes, sir.” They all seemed far more compliant than pranksters would be.

Severus conjured quills and parchment for all of them, “Give your observations to Professor Lupin. Rest assured they will be investigated.”

Severus stood, “I have many things to attend to tonight. You needn’t mention this conversation to Mr. Potter. I will not.” he thought they might be more forthcoming if he gave them a measure of anonymity. He left them in the capable and far more sympathetic, hands of Professor Lupin.

All the way back to his rooms, Severus struggled with himself. Potter was merely whining. He was an attention-seeker. He was creating stories to draw sympathy and impress his friends.

But Longbottom had been clumsy, incompetent. A daydreamer. A coward.

If what Granger and the Weasleys said was true, even in part...

Severus shuddered. He could hear the sound of Lily Evans crying for her son.
By Friday morning, Severus was ready to take up drinking in a serious way.

So far, the healer’s exams had turned up no less than twelve children who were considered “at risk”. Including one poor Hufflepuff girl, in her second year, whose case was so severe, that the healers had immediately applied to the Ministry to remove her from her parent’s custody. The others would need watching and extra support from their heads of houses, but they were not in any clear danger.

Severus smiled bitterly at the surprise on many of the teachers faces when the healers had given their report yesterday evening. They were appalled that this sort of thing could happen right under their noses, and a few indulged in what were really unseemly displays of emotion.

He had been ready to slap an hysterical Trelawny, when Lupin had intervened, telling her gently (more gently than Severus would have, anyway), but firmly, that such histrionics were not helpful to the situation. He went on to tell her that if she couldn’t control herself, she should take herself back to the North Tower and stay there.

Severus found himself in the odd position of actually agreeing with Lupin, whom he hated with a passion only a little less than that he bore for Potter’s bloody father. Lupin had almost as little patience for the general hand wringing as Severus himself did. Perhaps because he didn’t bear the guilt from knowing Longbottom for two years, and never seeing it.

It wasn’t that Severus didn’t feel the guilt for the boy’s death, it was more that Severus had learned to live with the weight of guilt a long time ago and continue on with the task at hand. Many of the teachers seemed nigh upon nonfunctional over this.

To be scrupulously fair, the heads of houses were rising to the occasion. Proving that, as peculiar as Dumbledore’s staffing decisions could be, he had chosen those individuals well.

Indeed, some of the worse cases were already known to the school, and had been under observation for some time. Fileas Flitwick had already identified one Ravenclaw whose family was need of investigation, prior to this incident, Severus had been watching three Slytherins that the healers had confirmed had multiple suspicious injuries and Pomona Sprout had reported one case in Hufflepuff last year. Minerva had left no reports of any, however.

Severus didn’t think this was necessarily due to negligence on Minerva’s part. He rather suspected that it was more due to the Gryffindor tendency toward foolish pride. Certainly, he had supervised enough detentions with them to know how obstinate they could be. Of the children who argued that these exams were unnecessary, the Gryffindors were often of the loudest volume.

Well, if he cared to admit it, his Slytherins were not far behind in sheer indignation.

It had been perhaps a mistake to cancel classes for the whole week. That had been a Ministry idea, coming from people who had not the vaguest concept of how ill advised it was to keep this many teenagers idle.

Madame Hooch had taken it upon herself to organize the Quidditch teams in extra practices. Severus approved of this heartily, as it also took many of them outside to watch.

The Muggle studies teacher, Charity Burbage had suggested that they bring in a counselor to speak with the more distraught children. Another suggestion that Severus approved as acting head. This death had hit the entire Wizarding world very hard, given who that the boys parents were commonly
known as heroes of the last War.

He wondered if anyone had told Frank and Alice that their only son had been murdered. Would they even understand? They were both largely unaware of anything; victims as they had been, of a prolonged Cruciatis Curse.

By all accounts, Augusta was on her way to a breakdown that would necessitate a bed in the locked ward beside her son.

Since the story had been published in the Daily Prophet, in lurid detail, parents had been sending Howlers all week. After the first few, Severus had forwarded all mail addressed to “Headmaster” to Dumbledore. However, all the teachers had gotten a Howler or two addressed to them. Some were the parents who were outraged that the staff had never seen the abuse, some were parents who took offense at their child being examined for abuse.

On the good side, the exams were progressing in an orderly manner. The healers were planning on working through the weekend so that classes could resume on Monday, so there was the better part of three days of this yet to face.

The files from the children to be examined today were in front of him on his desk. Harry Bloody Potter’s file at the top. The last piece of parchment was a note from Arabella Figg stating that she’d seen Harry the morning after he’d run away from home this summer.

Albus,

I’ve spoken to Harry this morning, as you asked. He seems rather the worse for wear. Has quite the shiner actually.

He’s been given quite a bit of yard work by the Dursleys, but that’s nothing unusual. I do wish there were a safer place to keep him.

Arabella

Quite the shiner?

That made Severus wonder, when he’d read it. A black eye in a teenage boy might be anything, so he’d owled Arabella for clarification. She had written back to say that Harry had told her a story about being in a scuffle with some Muggle teenagers when he’d run away.

From all accounts of that night, Harry had gotten directly onto the Knight Bus and had been there until Kingsley Shacklbolt had found him getting off at Diagon Alley. If there had been an altercation, it must have been damned short.

Shacklbolt was currently one of the Aurors searching the area for Sirius Black, so Snape was able to ask him to come have a word this morning. While he waited for the man, leafed through the boy’s papers.

There were his primary school records; they spoke of a quiet boy who seemed to lack motivation and was defiant at times.

Severus snorted to himself, he knew that already.

More reports went on to say that he never seemed to put effort into his homework, it often looked as though he’d done it in the few minutes between arriving at school and when the bell rang. Again, nothing new.
Some way down the stack, there was a rather ominous set of correspondence between the school nurse and one of Harry’s teachers:

There was one note that speculated that the Dursleys were having money trouble, since the smaller boy was always dressed in the bigger boy’s hand me downs.

Then there was a note from the school nurse, complaining that she had to tell Mrs. Dursley several times to get Harry’s eyes checked.

A third note in which the teacher commented that Harry often seemed injured in one way or another. When asked, the child merely replied that he was clumsy.

The reply from the nurse said, that since the injuries were very minor, it was likely that they were accidental, and that she’d speak with Mrs. Dursley about it.

There were many things Potter was, but never clumsy. As quickly as he’d taken to his broom, Severus doubted the boy had ever had a clumsy bone in his body.

The other thing to be considered, was the fact that Wizard children were so much harder to injure, and healed so much more quickly than Muggle children.

If Potter was being hurt badly enough to leave visible bruises, he’d have to have been doing something like playing Quidditch, or jumping from second story windows. As a Muggle raised child, it was very unlikely he’d been doing either of those things.

As much Severus wanted to, he couldn’t deny that a subtle pattern had begun to emerge.

“Professor Snape?” Shacklebolt stood at the open door of Severus’ office, “You wanted a word?”

“Yes, Mr. Shacklebolt, please come in.” Severus waved at the comfortable seat in the corner. Not the hard wooden one he always had students sit in.

Shacklebolt sat down, looking curious, when Severus flicked his wand to close the door.

“How is the Black situation?” Severus didn’t want the Auror to think he’d called him here to discuss Potter specifically, and as acting headmaster, he was within his rights to ask.

“Not a sign of him, Professor.” sighed Shacklebolt, “The dementors have even searched the Forest. The Centaurs were in an uproar about it, but the Ministry insisted.” Shacklebolt sounded irritated, as if insulted that the Ministry was insisting on using dementors to search for Black. "It’s even possible the man has fled, but..."

“You don’t think so?”

“No.” Shacklebolt said flatly.

Severus ran his hand through his hair, “As if we don’t have enough difficulties with this exam business.” he said bitterly.

Shacklebolt nodded in agreement, “I do wish I had something new to report.” Shacklebolt stood, “If that’s all, Professor Snape?”

Severus appreciated the man’s unwillingness to waste time on idle chat.

“Just one thing,” said Severus as if it had just occurred to him, when Shacklebolt had his hand on the doorknob, “I am trying to provide the healers with complete reports, on the home lives of our
students. I understand you were the one who found Mr. Potter the night he ran away, this summer?"

“I did,” Shacklebolt answered in his slow, deep voice.

“How was he when you saw him? The healers want to know about any upsets in the student’s lives.” Severus didn’t want to be too specific. Given that the Daily Prophet had gotten hold of the Longbottom story already, the last thing that Severus wanted to happen was have them start speculating about the Boy Who Lived. Aurors were very discreet, but the less said the better.

Shacklebolt replied, “He was a bit shaken up. He was very upset that he had to go back to his aunt and uncle’s house. Seemed to think he’d be in terrible trouble for just a bit of accidental magic.”

“We see that a lot with Muggle raised children.” agreed Severus seriously, thinking of the beatings his father used to give him for accidental magic, “But he seemed well, otherwise? I’m told he was in a scuffle with some other boys and had a bit of a black eye.”

Shacklebolt shook his head slowly, “Not a mark on him, that I saw.”

Severus nodded, “Well, he wasn’t specific on the timing. I suppose it was after he went home.” he said smoothly, “Thank you for your time.”

Shacklebolt nodded to Severus, “I’ll keep you up to date on the Black situation.” he said as he left.

Severus sat thinking about what this new scrap of information could mean. Shacklebolt had seen no bruises on the boy, but the next morning Arabella had.

With a renewed purpose, Severus began looking through the file. He applied his mind to it the way he would approach brewing an antidote to a potion. There was a lecture he gave his Seventh years on this very subject, “Assume you know nothing about the poison. That can get in the way of discovering the counter. Use your diagnostic spells and you may discover a pattern. They are often difficult to discern”

The pattern here became less subtle the more Severus stared at it.
The Seeker In Hiding

It might have been a very difficult few days if it hadn't been for Oliver.

Oliver Wood was a seventh year, and the Gryffindor Quidditch team Captain. He was determined to win the Quidditch Cup this year, his last chance at it while he was at Hogwarts. Taking advantage of the unexpected free time, and the permission of Madam Hooch, he had the Gryffindor team out first thing the next couple mornings for practice. He kept them out for two hours (the maximum allowed by Madam Hooch) for regular practice. Most of Thursday, he had the team sequestered in an empty classroom, as they talked tactics.

Harry was pleased; not only was it something to take his mind off the general gloom of the common room, but it gave him a convenient excuse to "forget" to see the healers.

Hermione had had her appointment on Thursday and she had told Ron and Harry that it wasn't a big deal, "They just run a few diagnostic charms and then ask some questions," she'd said.

Ron's appointment was going to be one of the last ones. Harry hadn't asked him the exact time, because he really didn't want to talk about any of it. Ron didn't seem worried either, but he said he'd had a few magical exams from healers and this sounded a lot like them.

"It's not that different from getting a check up with a doctor." Hermione had told Harry bracingly.

Harry didn't mention to Hermione that the Dursleys had never taken him to the doctor. The health nurse at school was all he'd ever seen.

Harry had looked in the mirror this morning. Most of the bruises had faded away to yellow and green blotches and the wheals from Vernon's cane had faded, as well. Harry still didn't like the healers to see them. He wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe just that he didn't like to explain that he'd blown up his aunt and had gotten smacked for it, like a baby.

Perhaps he could take a fall from his broom. That way, if the healers did catch up with him today, he could explain the lingering marks.

That seemed to gain appeal as he grabbed his Quidditch robes and broom. He was out on the pitch before the rest of the team, so he took a few fast practice laps around the field.

When Oliver and Katie Bell had walked out with Fred and George, Harry pulled up sharply on his broom handle, throwing himself onto the ground.

He sat up to spit the dirt out of his mouth. His glasses were bent, but that wasn't a problem. He pulled his wand from his sleeve and muttered a quick "Occulus Reparo"

"All right there, Harry?" asked Oliver.

Now that Harry could see, he took Oliver's proffered hand, staggering up, "Yeah, fine. Just took a tumble. I'm okay." half the mud from the pitch seemed to be clinging to him. His hair was full of the stuff.

"Well, come on, then." said Oliver clapping Harry on the back. Harry saw that Angelina Johnson had come out now, "We're all here, so let's get a move on."

It was one of the better practices they had had as a team. Oliver was planning to use the same team as
last year, unless someone was astonishingly good at tryouts, he'd said.

It was coming up on ten o'clock when Oliver finally called a halt. Harry gave the others a quick wave and told them he wanted to get the mud out of his hair. He didn't want anyone asking him if he'd been to his appointment yet. Quite apart from the fact that it would make his forgetting the thing less plausible, it was getting to feel like an alarming subject to him.

He slipped into the shower and was out of the bathroom before anyone had a chance to speak with him, even in passing.

Afterwards, he headed to the very back of the library. There he stayed, until students were going down to the Great Hall for lunch. A little bored with studying, Harry followed them out. But not to go to lunch. He worried that someone who realized he hadn't been to his appointment might see him. Instead he walked out to the grounds. The day had turned fine and he fancied a walk.

It seemed everyone had gone inside for lunch. Harry settled down by a favorite rock, overlooking the lake. It was close to the Whomping Willow, so it wasn't a highly trafficked area. The rock itself was large enough that he wasn't easy to see if he sat on the far side of it.

No matter how much Harry tried to avoid it, his mind turned to Neville. A solid lump seemed to have lodged itself permanently in his chest.

For a long time, Harry watched the giant squid, idly playing with weeds near the shore. He couldn't put a name to what he was feeling, not really.

He'd never known anyone who had died before. Well, there were his parents obviously, but he hardly remembered them. Neville was someone he played exploding snap and chess and gobstones with. He lent Neville notes and had stood up for him. Neville was the reason he'd been chosen for Seeker in his first year.

This morning he'd woken early. Because of Neville's empty bed, he'd waited a full five minutes before using the bathroom. Until he'd woken up properly, he assumed Neville was in there. It had made him feel stupid and it had also given him an almost physical feeling of disorientation. It was a little like dizziness, like the vertigo of doing one too many barrel rolls on a broom. The world had changed shape and he hadn't recognized the new shape.

Harry sniffed, glad that no one was around to see. He used his robe to dry his wet glasses.

The shadows had gotten long, by the time Harry reckoned it was safe to return to the castle. He had dozed off in the sunlight and woke up a little cold when the sun went down behind the trees.

Hungry now, Harry glanced at his watch and saw it was dinner time. He shook himself and walked slowly back up as the shadows gathered around the grounds.

A movement in the shadows of a tree got his attention. Harry lit his wand to see if he could see what was there. Two reflective, green eyes gazed out from beneath the Whomping willow. Strangely, the tree was as still as marble, for a moment.

Harry took two steps forward and the Willow swung a branch warningly at him. The two eyes flickered and went out.

The Great Hall was a little more lively than it had been this morning. Harry glanced at the head table and saw that the healers weren't there. He supposed they were gone for the day, and breathed a sigh of relief. He saw Ron and Hermione sitting at the end of the table and slid in beside Ron.
Hermione met Harry's greeting with a face full of anxiety, "Where have you been?" she demanded, sharply, "You missed your appointment. Professor Lupin was looking for you."

"Oh, right." Harry said quickly, trying to school his features into a properly blank expression, "I was at Quidditch Practice. Oliver's idea. I guess I forgot." Harry said, lightly, "And then I had a load of homework to finish. I guess I'll have to see them when they come back on Monday."

"Oh, but they're not coming back Monday. They're working the weekend." replied Hermione, "You better go find Professor Lupin and talk to him."

Harry shrugged, "All right, I'll go find him after dinner." he said, in what he hoped was a convincing manner.

"Yeah, you should. He seems pretty decent. He won't be too put out, if you talk to him." Ron was being uncharacteristically quiet, the last couple days. Now Harry noticed that he'd gone a little red, "Maybe we can get this over with, at the same time."

Harry nodded. He had no intention of looking for Lupin after dinner, or any other time. If he went with Ron, there would be no getting out of it, but if he hid out, until Sunday evening, the healers would be gone. It'd take that much more effort to reschedule the exam and would be that much longer for the marks to heal.

With any luck, it would be that much more likely to get lost, in the general chaos of the beginning of the school year.

With a better appetite than he'd had all week, Harry turned his attention to his food. It might be hard to get rid of Ron and Hermione, but if worse came to worst, he could hide out in the library in his invisibility cloak.

He felt vaguely uncomfortable as he thought this. He wasn't sure why he didn't like to let Ron and Hermione know why he was skiving off the exam. It was just because he didn't like being poked and prodded, he told himself. The healers would, more than likely, want to talk about his scar, and he hated that.

There again, it was one thing to see Madam Pomfrey when he'd injured something, but quite another to have people staring at him, as though he were some sort of freak. Surely they would do, when they saw the marks still visible on the backs of his legs, and the bruises on his chest (he wasn't sure about the ones on his back, he hadn't looked at those for a few days).

It wasn't anyone's business why he didn't want to see the healers, he decided firmly. If Ron and Hermione couldn't understand that, it was their problem.

Harry ate as quickly as he could, wanting to get out of the teacher's line of sight. He had found out years ago, that if stayed out of adults' way, they soon forgot about him. Well, unless they needed someone to blame for something. He had avoided looking at the teacher's table, trying not to draw attention to himself. That was why he didn't see Lupin and Snape until they were standing right behind him.

"Mr. Potter." said Snape's cold voice, causing him to choke on his last bite of potato.

Harry coughed hard, turning with watering eyes to look up at the looming professor. The man was standing so close, that Harry had to crane his neck to see him properly.

"Y-yes, sir?" Harry asked when he managed to get his windpipe cleared.
"You missed an appointment this morning." Snape said in a low, menacing voice, "Which part of this directive are you having trouble with? 'Mandatory' or 'Everyone'?)"

"I-uh-I just forgot." Harry replied in a small voice.

"Ah." replied Snape, silkily, "I see." he paused a beat, "Well, fortunately, I have some time this evening."

"Sorry?" Harry felt the first inkling of panic in his stomach.

"Professor Snape is qualified to do these exams, Harry. Since they all have to be done by Monday morning. The Professor and I have spent the afternoon rounding up today's stragglers." Professor Lupin said, kindly. He was standing beside Professor Snape, but he seemed to be trying to be reassuring.

Harry felt his face turn beet red, as the words sunk in, "Isn't Madam Pomfrey...?"

"Madam Pomfrey is currently in London, testifying at Longbottom's inquest," Snape replied coldly, his eyes narrowed, "So, you," Snape paused and gave Harry an unpleasant little smile, "Will have to make do with myself."

Lupin opened his mouth, as if he wanted to say something, but he closed it with a snap when Snape grabbed Harry's robe by the collar and pulled him to stand.

Harry flinched away with a small cry. Both hands going up instinctively to protect his face. He felt, rather than heard, the tables around him go quiet. Feeling utterly stupid, Harry slowly lowered his hands.

Snape's eyes darted from side to side, "Twenty points from Gryffindor for your...inattention." he said loudly, "And a detention for insolence, Mr. Potter. My office. Tonight. Move." Snape snarled, grabbing Harry by the upper arm. Then he added, in a deadly quiet voice, so quiet that only Harry heard, "You'll have plenty of time, after we're done in the infirmary." He turned, gestured for Lupin to precede him, and dragged Harry along side.

As Harry passed them, he heard Seamus Finnegan remark quietly, to Dean Thomas, "Snape's having a go at Harry again, things must be getting back to normal."

Despite the unfairness of the detention, having everyone think he had been mouthing off to Snape again made Harry feel better about being marched out of the Great Hall, in front of the whole school.

Harry gave Dean and Seamus a smirk over his shoulder, and the noise of the hall resumed.
Exam

Chapter Notes

Some descriptions of child abuse.

Harry stumbled a few times as Severus pulled him along, so fast was Severus walking. Lupin kept glancing at them, concerned. Severus glared at Lupin, over the boy's head, daring Lupin to speak, or protest his manhandling of the Boy Who Lived.

Lupin, wisely, didn't make a comment as the made their way to the hospital wing. Although he looked pointedly at Potter and then Severus, the second time the boy stumbled. Severus made an effort to slow his pace and loosen his grip, taking in the the boy's ashen complexion.

Potter didn't say anything either. No arguing. Not even his characteristic grumblings about unfairness. Nor did Severus get the idea he was biting his tongue, to keep from saying something that would get him in deeper trouble.

That, more than anything else, concerned Severus. One would think that Potter was going to his own execution. Severus could feel the boy tremble through the firm hold he had on his upper arm. This was the sort of reaction Longbottom had (Severus winced at that thought, but it was true) to him, not Potter.

When the Potter hadn't turned up at his appointment this morning, Severus had checked the pitch first. Naturally, the boy was there. From a distance, Severus watched how Potter had practically fled from his teammates, with all the signs of someone who did not want to be confronted.

Severus returned to the castle with further misgivings about Potter and a plan forming in his mind.

The boy did not return to the castle for lunch, and Severus knew for a fact that Potter had not eaten breakfast. At four o'clock in the afternoon, Severus went down to the kitchens to ask the house elves if they'd fed the boy. To a one, they denied it. In fact they didn't think he even knew where the entrance to the kitchens was.

Severus had watched the boy eat the night before, if he had been sliding food into his pockets, planning a prolonged fast (anything more than a few hours to a teenage boy could be considered prolonged), he was better at it than Severus would imagine. Granted, he'd not been watching for it, but Severus had been a teacher long enough to recognize the signs of sneaking objects off of a table.

Both of those scenarios were rather disturbing to contemplate. Either the boy was accustomed to missing meals, or he was a fairly skilled thief. Given that one of his best friends was rule-happy Granger, Severus had to assume the former, rather than the latter.

Severus watched the boy walk into the Great Hall this evening, trying to keep his head down and remain unnoticed. Severus had waited until the boy had almost finished what was on his plate (he didn't like to do a medical exam on a child who was likely to pass out from low blood sugar.) and had signaled to Lupin to come with him. In an effort to avoid the whole school gossiping about the missed appointment, Severus provoked enough of a response from the boy to get a reaction that was typical of their interactions. No one looked askance at Severus assigning Potter a detention.
That reaction sat uneasily with Severus. He'd grabbed the scruff of the boy's neck, true, but not violently. He'd merely pulled the boy up to stand, and the boy had reacted as though he'd truly thought he was going to be struck.

Dumbledore had forbidden striking or caning a student when he'd become headmaster, more than forty years ago. As much as Severus had been tempted to throttle the boy, he'd never laid a hand on him, nor had any other teacher.

Merely being a bit twitchy when a disliked school teacher grabs one by the scruff of one's neck, proved nothing, but it was one more line in the pattern.

Potter looked downright ill, by the time they entered the hospital wing.

"There's nothing to worry about," Lupin told the boy, kindly.

Potter looked at Lupin like he'd grown a second head. He squeaked something that might have been, "Yes, Professor."

Severus let go of the boy's arm when he'd closed the door of the hospital wing. He locked it non-verbally. He was not going to put himself in the position of chasing down a thirteen year old who'd fled on frightened or angry impulse.

Cubicles had been set up in the long room to provide privacy for the healers, the assistants and their patients. Severus gestured to the first cubicle, "I'll be doing your exam, Potter, and Professor Lupin will be assisting me."

"Are you expecting to need someone to hold me down?" Finally, Potter sounded more like himself. He looked defiantly at the two men, his chin jutting out in a way that always reminded Severus of James Potter. As always, it made Severus want to throw glass, just to hear it break.

"The exam is painless, Harry." Lupin said gently, "It's Ministry procedure, that each exam be witnessed by a second party."

"Oh." That seemed to catch Potter off guard. He subsided, biting his lip.

Severus pulled one of the exam gowns off the sideboard where they were stored, "Out of your robes. Down to your pants, if you please. Cover up with this. It opens in the back."

The boy turned an intriguing shade of red, as he took what he obviously thought was a very inadequate gown. Lupin grinned a little, turning his face to the window so Potter didn't catch it.

Severus gestured at the cubicle again, "Go change in there. Open the curtain, when you're changed. Don't take long. I have no interest in prolonging this."

The boy nodded, that ashen pallor back in his face.

"Do you have to be so brusque?" Lupin asked, very quietly, as the boy did as he was told.

"Yes." Severus replied, with a glare at the man.

Potter pulled the curtain open.

"Up on the table, then." Lupin told him, with a little smile. The boy complied. Uneasily resting his hands on thin thighs. The exam gown was longer than it should have been on a third year, coming almost down to his knees.
At first impression, Severus was very surprised at the boy's thinness. Under his robes, one didn't notice it.

He was tanned, in fact he was rather sunburned, and the tan ended where tee shirt sleeves would begin. Potter's legs were white, suggesting that the boy had worn jeans all summer.

Severus noted almost faded straight lines across the shins and side of one of his calves.

Potter's arms, normally hidden under long sleeves, were indeed covered with a motley of green and yellow bruises.

Fresh bruises and abrasions covered the back side of his right arm. His knees were skinned and his chin bore the mark of his face plant this morning, at practice.

Severus waved his wand at the parchment that would record the exam, "The patient is Harry James Potter, third year. Performed by Severus Snape, Medi-Wizard. Witnessed by Remus Lupin, acting head of Gryffindor House." Severus added the incantation that would record the results of the diagnostic charms.

"Now, Potter, this exam will be recorded." Severus told the boy.

Potter nodded, still biting his lip.

Severus started with the simplest charms that read height, weight, pulse, current magical usage, blood pressure and respiration. He looked at the numbers, frowning in concentration. The boy's magic was highly active, as it would be if he were recovering from major injuries. His weight was low and his height was at the very bottom of the growth scale.

Severus put the parchment on the instrument table, "Take off your glasses."

The boy hesitated.

"Please." Severus, his tone not quite gentle, but trying not to threaten. His suspicions were being confirmed with every step they took "I will not do anything, without warning you first."

The boy took off his glasses and squinted at Severus, biting his lip again.

Those eyes, without the accustomed spectacles and the expression, so filled with anxiety, undid Severus for a fraction of a second. That was Lily's expression, when she was nervous.

It was a good thing the procedure of assessments had been so well drilled into Severus' head when he was a potions apprentice. He put away the emotion to deal with later.

He tested the boy's eyes first, noting that he was quite myopic, but otherwise they were fine. Severus gave Potter back the glasses, sighing in relief when he no longer had to look at Lily's eyes unhindered.

"I'm going to run some charms now that will detect injuries both recent and old." Severus said, falling into Medi-wizard mode, "Lie back on the table."

Potter did so. Lupin watched the parchment while Severus ran the tests. It took much longer than it should have.

The list of injuries had grown to the length of two feet, by the time it finished. Severus noted Lupin's expression was disbelieving and shocked.
"Sit up." Severus told the boy absently, as he went to look at the parchment with Lupin. The catalogue of injuries was impressive.

"Potter?" Severus strove to keep his voice even and dispassionate, "You have had several concussions. At least three. Do you know how they happened?"

Potter opened and closed his mouth two or three times, before he said, "I fell. I'm clumsy." the words were said with in an emotionless voice, lessons learned by rote.


Lupin read the parchment looking increasingly upset, "Harry, we just need to know how you got all these injuries."

Potter looked up at both the older wizards. He seemed to consider, for a bare second, complying with the request. Then something shut in the back of Potter's eyes, "It's nothing. I play a lot of Quidditch." he shrugged with bravado.

"Please stand up, and turn around for me." Severus requested flatly.

Harry stood slowly. He hesitated. Lupin gave him an encouraging smile. Potter took a deep breath and turned around, as if it took an act of will.

"I need to see your back to run some more charms." Said Severus, moving the back of the robe apart.

Straight, fading red lines littered Potters back from neck to knees. Some of them as new as five days old, according to the charms.

Severus took a long breath. He went to the drawer of the table, taking out a bottle of potion, "Please, sit again."

The boy slid up onto the exam table.

"This is a diagnostic potion, I need you to take it now." Severus said evenly.

Harry reached out, slowly took the bottle and drained it. Severus didn't miss that the boy's hand was shaking.

Severus picked up the parchment, again reading the different injuries it recorded. He forced himself to wait for a full sixty seconds before continuing his questioning.

"Tell me Potter, how did you come to break the second, third and fourth metacarpals in your right hand?" asked Severus slowly, "It appears to have been, perhaps, four years ago."

"Metacarpals?" asked Harry, a little dozily. His eyes were taking the characteristic glassiness one might expect, from the potion Severus had just given him.

Severus took the boy's hand, turned it palm down and pointed to the hand bones between wrist and knuckle of his index, middle and ring fingers, "These were broken. Possibly crushed." While he did so, he noticed that the pattern of bruising on the boy's arm looked defensive. The injuries one would pick up trying to fend off an attacker.

"Oh, that was Dudley. He caught them in the front door." The boy looked a little surprised, as though he wasn't expecting to hear his own voice.
“An accident, then?” asked Lupin, hopefully.

The boy laughed bitterly, “No, he just wanted to see what would happen. He and Piers caught me. Piers held me down and Dudley slammed the door.”

“What did your Aunt do?” asked Severus curiously.

“ Took Dudley and Piers out so they didn’t need to hear me. Aunt Petunia locked me in the cupboard because I was whinging too much.” The boy sighed, sadly, “I didn’t mean to. Aunt Petunia let me out when it was better.”

“Cupboard?” asked Lupin, he glanced at Severus his eyebrows drawn into a confused frown.

“Yes, that’s where they kept me. Where else would you put a freak like me?” yawned Potter, matter of factly. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses, as though he were suddenly very tired.

To be expected. The combination of potions Severus had given Potter tended to put those who were suffering from injuries to sleep. They wouldn’t have long before the boy was insensible.

Long enough to get through this, however.

“Where did you get those concussions?” asked Severus.

“S’ a concussion?” Potter asked, tiredly.

“You hit your head, often you're dizzy and nauseous for a while.” Lupin replied gently

“I s’pose Aunt Petunia did it. She likes to whack me with the frying pan if she doesn't like they way I did the dishes. Or if I burn a meal...I haven't done that in a long time, though.”

“Those marks on your back?” asked Lupin, anxiously. Severus already knew what the answer had to be.

“Oh, Aunt Marge told Uncle Vernon he ought to use the cane on me.” the boy paused, as though considering something, "She showed him how to do it properly before she left.”

“Is that why you ran away from home?” Severus asked, sharply.

The boy shook his head, "No. That only happened after the Ministry took me back.” He sighed, his eyes drifting closed. He fell sideways, like a tree that had been chopped down.

Severus had been watching for it and caught the boy before he could fall from the table and do himself further injury. He lay the boy down and transfigured the exam table into a hospital bed.

“Come on,” he hissed to the pale Lupin, stalking from the room.

“You gave him a truth potion.” Lupin growled accusingly, after throwing a silencing charm around them.

“Of course I did,” Severus retorted, summoning a chair for himself. After looking closely at Lupin, he also summoned another chair, a side table and the large bottle of firewhiskey Poppy, Pomona and himself had been working their way through this week, that was in Poppy's office.

Severus poured a glass for himself and on for Lupin, which he shoved into the man's hand, before continuing, "All with Ministry approval, I assure you. I did not lie to Potter when I said it was a diagnostic potion. How else are we supposed to diagnose child abuse if the victims won't speak the
truth about their injuries? It is a mild one. I mixed it with a calming draft. He must not be sleeping, for it to make him so very tired."

Lupin sank slowly into his chair, "We have to report this to the Ministry." he said sipping on his drink.

Severus threw his drink down his throat, "We'll do no such thing," he said harshly.

"But, Severus," replied Lupin astonished, "Isn't that what this whole business is about?"

"Can you imagine what the reaction to this would be? After Longbottom?" hissed Severus, "It would cause a complete collapse in confidence in the Ministry. We'd be lucky to avoid riots. And then, we don't know where the boy would end up. The custody of the Boy Who Lived would be sold off to the highest bidder, I expect."

"Surely, you don't intend to leave him with his relatives, after what you've just seen and heard?" demanded Lupin.

"Much may be said of me, Lupin," Severus said dangerously, "But I do not condone the abuse of children. Not even children as annoying as Potter." Severus sagged back in his chair, "I believe I have a way we can take care of this privately." he poured himself another drink, "It will take a little bit of arranging, and Potter will not like it in the least."

Severus drank his second glass of firewhiskey slowly enough to taste it this time, while he considered the next step. There was no question that it needed to be kept to the fewest number of people possible. But, Severus couldn't do this alone--the papers needed witnessing if they were going to avoid drawing the attention of the Ministry. He eyed the other man, speculatively, "I wonder, Lupin, as the boy's acting head of house, do you feel up to making a home visit?"
Harry's reaction to his exam.

The small room was dark, illuminated by the lantern that sat on a side table. Harry squinted to make out the figure who sat reading by its light. He didn't know where his glasses had gotten to and it was too dark to really see properly.

The figure moved to turn the page of its book and Professor Lupin's silhouette was back lit by the lantern's soft halo

Memory of the last few hour came rushing back. Oh god, what had he been saying to Professor Snape? He'd babbled at Snape, of all people, and Lupin, whom he hardly knew. What on earth had possessed him? Uncomfortably, Harry realized he didn't entirely remember everything he'd said. Then he'd passed out, like he had on the train.

Harry shifted a little, willing himself to calm down. As he did so, he realized that all the lingering soreness of Uncle Vernon's caning was gone. Had Snape done something? That seemed outside of his character. Harry had assumed that Snape would have approved of his punishment for running away from home. Perhaps because the current atmosphere, the Professor thought it was better if he didn't leave Harry with those sort of marks

"Harry?" said Professor Lupin's voice, softly, "Are you awake?"

He had been wondering if he could sneak out of here, before anyone realized he was awake, but that was apparently not going to happen. He considered just pretending to still be asleep, but decided that laying here would be worse. "Yes, sir." he replied, just as quietly. Professor Lupin had seemed nice enough, but Harry had no idea what he was really like.

A second lamp lit, this one on the table next to Harry. The light revealed his glasses and wand sitting there. He put his glasses back on, realizing they were still in that little exam cubicle and he was still in the exam gown, now under several layers of blankets.

Able to see the Professor properly, the child was gratified to see the man was smiling gently, "How are you feeling?" the older wizard asked.

"I'm fine." replied Harry, surprised to note that it was actually truthful at the moment(physically, at least), "What time is it?"

"It's not yet curfew." said Lupin, "If you're feeling up to it, I daresay you could get up and get dressed. Professor Snape said it was not abnormal for you to fall asleep from his," Harry thought he heard the barest hesitation, "Diagnostic potion. He asked me to sit with you until you awoke. He should be back shortly." Lupin stood, "I'll wait for you outside." leaving him to get dressed in peace.

Harry slid out of bed, realizing as he did so, that all his injuries had been healed, including the marks from where he took the spill from his broom this morning.

While he was getting dressed, he heard the door of the hospital wing open then shut. A hushed voice
that he recognized as Snape's spoke and then Lupin's slightly higher voice answered, but Harry
couldn't make out the words. It almost sounded like they were arguing, but not wanting to be
overheard. It reminded him very much of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia when they were "having a
discussion".

Hopefully they weren't having a disagreement about him. He always got the worst of it when adults
argued about him, no matter who won the argument.

Harry wondered what the results of this exam were. He had seen the look on Lupin's face when the
man had been reading the parchment. He'd looked almost angry. And Snape had given Harry the
kind of look he usually reserved for Harry's most dismal potion failures.

Snape had told him not to lie about his injuries, in a dangerous voice that Harry wouldn't have
ordinarily disobeyed. He'd considered just telling them, but then he thought of what had happened
other times when he'd been candid about things. No, he wasn't leaving himself open for that.

Snape had given him something that had gotten him talking. Harry concentrated, trying to remember
what he'd said. He looked at his hand. He seemed to remember telling Lupin and Snape about the
time Dudley and Piers had squished his hand in the door. That was okay, he supposed, that was just
his cousin bullying him. No one would care about that.

Aunt Petunia and the frying pan; he had mentioned that too. Well, it's not as though Aunt Petunia hit
him any harder than a Bludger. And it only happened when he was too slow to dodge, it wasn't as
though she'd meant to connect so solidly.

In a way, he was glad now that Snape had done the exam. At least Snape wasn't as likely to blow
these things out of proportion.

Steeling himself for the ordeal, Harry stepped out of the cubicle. Lupin and Snape stopped talking
and turned towards him.

Snape's expression was perfectly neutral, "Potter," he said, "I believe you owe me a detention this
evening."

Harry thought Lupin was going to object, but the man sighed and merely shifted his stance.

Snape summoned a chair and a table, conjured a quill and parchment, "Lines, Potter."

Harry sighed and sat down, picking up the quill, "Yes, sir. What should I write?" Perhaps, this was a
good sign. The exam couldn't have turned up anything that upset the professors too much, if Snape
still wanted to give him lines.

"I am not a freak!

"I am not a freak.' One hundred times." the Professor said coolly.

"Professor?" said Harry, perplexed, not sure he'd heard properly.

Professor Snape turned his snarl on Harry, "Are you questioning my detention, Potter?" he growled.

"No, sir." Harry said hastily, dipping his quill to start the lines. Where the hell had the Professor
come up with that? Suddenly, Harry was chilled with the thought that he had a vague memory of
telling the man Aunt Petunia's favorite epithet. Was Snape going to make a regular taunt out of it,
too?

I am not a freak
Harry wrote the first line while the man was standing there, "Is this what you want me to write, sir?" he showed the man what he'd written. If he'd gotten it wrong he was not going to write it a hundred times (although that seemed a low number of lines for Snape), just to have to do it over.

Snape nodded once, 'Yes, Potter. One hundred times.'

Professor Lupin watched the whole exchange with a bemused expression.

"We will be in Madam Pomfrey's office. When you are finished, bring me the parchment and then get to bed." Snape said, calmly.

"Yes, sir." Harry picked up his quill, held it in the air, "Sir?" he asked tentatively, only because Lupin was there and he didn't think Snape would shout too much in front of him, "Erm. The exam. What...er...what does it mean?"

Snape stopped in the act of turning away, "It means we have a great deal to discuss." His voice was heavy. His black eyes seemed deeper than usual. Harry didn't recognize the expression they held.

"It's not...I mean...what's there to talk about?" Harry asked, sounding a little desperate to his own ears.

"Harry," said Lupin gently, "Surely, you know that your relatives can't be allowed to continue to treat you this way."

"I told the Minister that Uncle Vernon would punish me." Harry said in a very small voice, "He didn't think it was that important. He said that maybe a needed a firm hand. I thought...I thought..."

Harry had thought, all through the last fortnight of the summer, that it was all justified. All right, the backhand he'd gotten from Uncle Vernon the first night was a bit much, granted, but the man had been rather beside himself. Harry had blown up Aunt Marge and the Reversal of Accidental Magic Squad had just deflated and Obliviated her. By the time Harry had been brought back by the Minister, she'd remembered nothing other than Harry had been cheeky with her and then had fled the house. She was incensed that the "police" had brought Harry back. She had a great many suggestions of how to keep "that young hooligan" in line. That night had been the worst.

The rest of it wasn't such a big thing,

"I just don't understand what the problem is." Harry was feeling panicky, as he had when Snape first said he was going to handle Harry's exam himself. He couldn't have said why though, "No one's ever had a problem with the Dursley's before. Why is it such a big deal now?"

Lupin made a move with his hand, as though to put it on Harry's shoulder, but pulled it back at the last second.

"Be that as it may," said Snape in his cold way, "We will need to discuss some things. But not tonight. You have a detention to finish." Snape made a little motion towards Madam Pomfrey's office with his head, beckoning Lupin.

Harry spoke up again. This time he didn't care about the fearful note in his voice, "You won't...tell anyone, will you? About..." Harry shrugged his shoulders, not able to finish the sentence or articulate what he meant. He didn't think he could bear the humiliation of the school finding out about this summer. Not after all the gossip last year. Not after seeing all the gossip this term.

It would be in the Daily Prophet like the story about Neville, in two days time. Harry thought he'd prefer to throw himself off of the Astronomy tower than deal with that.
"Harry, there’s no reason to worry..." began Lupin.

"No, Potter. You have my word, on that." said Snape, as he walked away, without turning around.

Oddly, Harry found that immensely reassuring.

It didn’t take Harry long to write the lines Snape had demanded. It was a shorter sentence than Snape usually chose, as well. It was still a curious thing to ask him to do. When he was done, Harry felt strangely light. Lighter than he had felt since Aunt Marge had called his mother and father names.

When he was finished, he knocked on the office door.

"Come in." called, Lupin's voice.

"I've finished." Harry said softly, opening the door. The two men were sitting across the desk, from each other. They seemed to be going over papers. Harry handed his parchment to Snape.

Snape peered at the parchment. Surprisingly, he folded it up and tucked it into his robes. Generally, Snape incendio'd lines one had done for detention (or at least the ones Harry did). The first time Harry had told Hermione about this habit, she looked as if she was going to cry.

"Go on, get to bed." Lupin said to the boy, "We'll talk later."

Snape merely nodded in agreement, his face completely impassive.

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He fled back to the tower as fast as his feet would take him.

"You're late." the Fat Woman grumbled, as she swung open for him.

"Detention," muttered Harry as he passed.

Most of the students had gone to bed, but Ron and Hermione were sitting by the fire.

"Harry!" called Hermione, "Are you all right?"

Harry attempted nonchalance, "Yeah, Snape just gave me lines." he sat on the arm of the chair next to Ron.

"But, what about your exam?" demanded Hermione.

"Oh, Snape did that too. It was like you said, no big thing."

"What did he say about..." Hermione stopped, turning red.

"About what?" Harry asked confused.

"Well, I just wondered what he said about...the bruises all over your arms." Hermione rushed out.

Harry noticed that Ron had turned red too. He thought about the inquisitive looks that Lupin been giving him for the last couple days. The furtive ones Hermione had given him. How anxious they had been that he get his exam.

"Did you...say something to Lupin?" Harry asked, slowly.

"Well, we were worried. Especially after what happened last year, and well, we thought..." Hermione said quickly.
A sudden flash of anger blazed to life in Harry's stomach.

How could they? How *could* they? It wasn't anyone's business but his. They had no *right*.

Harry could think of nothing to say. He stood up, opened his mouth, but he was afraid he might cry if he spoke. Instead he turned on his heel and fled up to his dorm.

He pulled off his robes and crawled into bed. Seamus and Dean both had their curtains closed, for which Harry was grateful. He pulled his own shut and lay down, not sleeping for a long time.

He never heard Ron come up to bed, though.
Chapter Summary

A secret is revealed.

I struggled with this chapter, but this is the way the story has always gone in my head. I was tempted to take it in a different direction, but if I changed it, I would be telling a different story.

It veers into Severitis territory here. Not canon compliant, at all. If you don't care for that, don't read further.

That Saturday morning, Harry decided he wouldn't get up until he’d heard all his dorm mates leave. He didn't bothered to reply to Ron's persistent calling, until the red head actually put his head through the curtains.

"Oi, Harry. You getting up?" Ron sounded as though he was trying to be casual. And failing.

"Leave me the hell alone, Ron." Harry hissed. He lay with his head still buried in the pillows and the blankets over his head. It was childish and stupid, but he wasn't ready to face anyone. He didn't know what they'd told Lupin and he didn't think he wanted to know.

Silence, then, "Yeah, okay." Ron sounded hurt and taken aback.

Footsteps walking away and the the door opening and closing. Harry cautiously picked up his head. He was, indeed, alone.

Harry had had uneasy dreams all night. His mind kept going back to Lupin telling him that his relatives couldn't be allowed to continue to treat him the way they did. He assumed it was meant to be reassuring, but Harry had been down this road before.

Lupin would have a chat with the Dursleys and tell him his concerns. Petunia would wail that the boy was unmanageable and Vernon would say he just used too firm a hand, that one time. Purely out of frustration, you understand. And of course, Harry often provoked Dudley. Dudley was a very sensitive boy, who lost his temper easily to the smaller one's blandishments. When they fought, Dudley had no idea of his own strength. Oh, and Harry really was clumsy.

The adults would have a fine meeting and would all be in agreement.

The next time Harry went home, the fun would truly begin.

This had happened in primary school, too. The nurse had gotten it into her head that the Dursleys were somehow mistreating Harry and had met with them. She'd even come to the house. Harry had been sent outside to "play" with Dudley, so he never heard the conversation. The nurse had looked at him sadly as she left. That night Harry had gotten to hear the full catalog of his faults. It had decreased Uncle Vernon's casual slaps for a while, but for months, Harry had had to listen to Vernon and Petunia tell him what an incredible burden he was for them.

It also happened once in a while, on a smaller scale, when Harry and Dudley had been down the
shops with Petunia. Petunia would get stressed and shout at Harry for something, some well meaning passer by would remonstrate her for her tone. After the person had left, Petunia would launch into one of her tirades about what an ungrateful burden Harry was.

Harry pretty much preferred to be smacked, most days, than listen to that. Like what Marge had said about his parents, the words seemed to crawl inside his head,


Worse yet, Snape would probably talk to them as well. Anything the Dursleys made up about Harry, Snape would believe, as long as it was unpleasant.

Harry had resigned himself long ago to the fact that he was stuck with the Dursleys. Last summer had been a bit of a nightmare, but it was over now. It wasn't anything like Neville's situation.

Rumors had been going around the school about a few of the other students. The speculation of a few days ago had morphed into a more solid list of people. Word around the common room was that a shy little Hufflepuff girl had yet to return to school, after being whisked away by the healers. She was in Ginny's year and Harry honestly couldn't have said what her name was or if he had ever seen her.

A few others had been mentioned, but thus far no other Griffyndors. Harry didn't try to follow the gossip, just grateful his name wasn't included.

Naturally, today, that would change. Lupin would have a quiet talk with the teachers and they would start treating Harry as though he were made of spun glass. Harry assumed that the students who weren't completely stupid, would read the signs of that. His housemates, and the the rest of the school would catch on to what Harry really was.

The Boy Who Lived: unwanted orphan.

Curiously, that Professor Snape was filling in for the Headmaster was sort of a source of comfort. Harry had never known the man to go back on a promise (or a threat). He often favored his Slytherins outrageously and he was a bully, to be sure, but he was...reliable? Predictable.

Snape had said that he wouldn't tell anyone. So therefore, he would not.

Lupin though, with his sympathetic looks and his kind eyes could cause some trouble for Harry. Do gooders always did. Hopefully, Snape wouldn't let Lupin say anything either.

Harry finally got up around lunch time. At first glance, the common room was empty. Sitting down in his favorite chair by the fire, Harry realized that Ginny was curled up in the opposing one, her head resting on the arm of the chair.

At first he thought she was asleep, but she stirred and opened reddened eyes, "Hi, Harry." she mumbled.

"Hi, Ginny." he sighed, "Not going to lunch?"

Ginny shook her head, "Not hungry. You?" she uncurled from the chair and sat up.

"Me either." he shrugged.

"You and Ron have a row?" she asked, dully.
"Sort of." Harry replied. Ginny was the last person he wanted to talk about it with.

She didn't press him. She just sighed and rubbed her eyes, "I'm going to the library. See you."

She got up and headed out the door.

Harry decided he'd better do the same before anyone else wanted to talk to him.

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Severus was already regretting asking the Wolf to come with him. But really, who else would be better? The forms would need a witness to sign them. If nothing else, Lupin had been devoted to James Potter. He would have his own reasons to keep this quiet.

Severus looked over the parchment from Harry's exam again. He'd have to give it to Poppy, but she could be trusted absolutely. Fortunately, the Ministry didn't require the results of each exam, only the ones deemed troublesome by the healers and himself. Poppy was discreet, as well. She'd understand completely.

Albus wasn't likely to be a problem. He wouldn't like this turn of events very much, but after Longbottom, he was doubting many of his decisions. Severus decided he would deal with Albus when he got back.

The real problem would be Potter. He wouldn't accept the change in guardianship without a fight, Severus assumed. The boy was far too used to going his own way. Although, this new knowledge made some of Potter's more ridiculous stunts come into better focus.

Frankly, when he went over the child's results, he wondered why the boy wasn't more of a savage than he was.

A quiet knock at the door roused Severus from his reverie.

"Come in, Lupin." called Severus, glancing at the clock. They were setting out for Little Whinging in fifteen minutes and Lupin was always punctual (one of the few good things Severus had ever thought of the man).

"So. Are you going to tell me how you propose to take care of this without the Ministry hearing?" asked Lupin as he came in through the door, before he had even closed it.

Severus slammed the door behind him with a flick of his wand, "I won't, if you inform the whole castle." he growled, rising from his desk chair.

To Severus' complete irritation, Lupin rolled his eyes, "No one's in the corridor. I checked." He leaned casually against the arm of Severus' setee.

Taking a deep breath, Severus picked up the old parchment laying on his desk. He held it tightly, "Lupin, I must have your word that you will never tell anyone what I am about to share with you."

The werewolf looked at him blankly, "Of course, but..."

"If you repeat any of this, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Lupin seemed to understand that he was completely serious. "You have my word, Severus." he replied slowly, with the weight of a Wizard's Promise behind it. Not quite an Unbreakable Vow, but good enough for this.
It was harder than he thought it would be, to extend his hand and give the letter to Lupin. He watched the other man's eyes go wide and then narrow in confusion, "Why on earth would Lily..?"

"Ask me to look after the boy?" finished Severus sourly.

"Well, yes." Lupin handed the letter back to Severus looking thunderstruck, "You were working for Voldemort then."

"Actually, at the time, I was spying for Dumbledore." said Severus softly, taking the letter back. He tucked it carefully into the pocket of his robes where it kept company with the several other parchments he would need today.

"So, why didn't you try to take Harry, after Sirius..?" Lupin swallowed.

"I had...personal reasons." grunted Severus, "Why didn't you?"

The other wizard sagged against the back of the setee. The sunlight that came in through the false window illuminated the man's face, highlighting his tired visage, "I tried. But, most of the werewolves were on Voldemort's side, in the War. The Ministry wouldn't hear of it, and Harry had already been placed with Lily's sister. I thought I'd leave well enough alone." Lupin ran his hand through his hair, "But, that still doesn't explain how you're going to transfer guardianship without the Ministry finding out. They're sure to have questions as to why."

"Not if the new guardian was also a blood relative." Severus said quietly, "No alarms would go off at the Ministry. Especially if the guardian in question was of closer relation than an aunt."

"What?" demanded Lupin, "Start talking sense. Harry has no other blood relations." Comprehension seemed to dawn slowly on the man's face and he began to look angry. He fingered his wand as though he wanted to hex Severus, "What are you trying to say? Don't you tell me that Albus lied about Petunia being the only living family left." he growled.

"This is one that even Albus doesn't know about." Severus sat down at his desk again, rubbing his face with one hand, silently asking Lily for forgiveness, "Did...did Potter the elder ever tell you how much trouble they had conceiving their son?"

"I didn't know they had any trouble." replied Lupin, quizzically, "Harry was born when they'd been married two years. I didn't think it was that long. I just thought Lily wanted to finish her healer training and James had only just qualified as an Auror."

"Ah." sighed Severus, "Well, they'd been trying for over a year when Lily contacted me. It was Halloween night. Two years before she died. Before," Severus swallowed, "Before she was targeted by the Dark Lord."

Severus had been more than surprised to find Lily standing at his door, tear streaked and windblown, "I don't know where else to go." she said, as he'd drawn her in through the door. And then, through her sobs, she'd spilled the whole tale at his feet.

"She had suspected the problem was James. She'd already had the diagnostic charms run on herself." Severus told Lupin, coming back to the present, "That day, she'd taken it on herself to run some on James with him unaware. He had..." he hesitated; this was not something usually discussed in polite company, save among healers, "He was unable to father children."

"No. That can't be right...she told us she was expecting at Christmas that year."

The dark man folded his arms across his chest and looked down at the desk in front of him, "I agreed
"to help her," he admitted quietly. After a long moment he dared to look up.

Finally, the Wolf replied in a befuddled voice, "Help her?" Lupin looked like he'd been the victim of a Confoundus charm as he the meaning of what he'd been told tried to sink in.

"Must I spell it out for you?" asked Severus dryly.

"Oh, but...Harry...he looks exactly like..." Lupin got Severus' meaning, but appeared to be trying to reject the entire notion.

"Have you never heard of a potion called Occludus Paternus? Very popular among women whose husbands suffer from this particular Pure Blood malady. And those who are wont to take lovers."

Lupin stared at Severus. "She and you?"

"That is the general way." Severus replied, harshly.

"How many times?" asked Lupin, in a whisper.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Severus, in surprise.

Lupin took a deep breath, "Was it just to conceive the child or was Lily...?" he seemed on the verge of tears.

"I assure you, between us, Lily and I made sure that she would be caught the first time." replied the Potion's Master evenly.

"So...so just...just the once? Why didn't she come to us though? Sirius would have. In a heartbeat. I know that James would have been all right with it." babbled the other wizard, "She must have known that."

No doubt Black would have jumped at the chance, Severus thought snidely. Although, he only said, "Perhaps Lily was a better judge of character."

Lupin fell silent, looking upset, "But still, why you?" he asked after a moment.

Severus looked at the man squarely, "Because she'd once been my best friend. Because she knew I'd keep her secret. Because she knew I loved her and I wouldn't take advantage of the situation."

"Wouldn't take advantage? What does that mean?"

"Let us just say that, though I loved Lily, she wasn't exactly my," Severus paused delicately, "Type."

"Oh." Lupin digested that, "But this means your Harry's fa-"

"No, Lupin. James Potter was the boy's father, in every way that mattered." Severus said in his deadliest voice, "And you will not reveal this to the boy. We will tell him that I am the only one available at the moment. If necessary, we will lie to him. It's likely that I can transfer guardianship to Dumbledore or Minerva in the spring, when the political climate isn't so volatile. But, I will be damned if I'm allowing Petunia to maintain guardianship over Lily's son another day."
Little Whinging was an attractive enough place, Severus thought, contemptuously. Assuming, one liked houses all made of ticky-tacky.

He emerged into the sunlight from the dim confines of Arabella's house, which was not more than a block away from the Dursleys. The less time they spent here, the better.

Lupin strode beside Severus, not saying a word. Severus was half tempted to Obliviate the man as soon as they were done here. But no, there was still the little matter of needing a witness should the Ministry ever decide to audit the papers.

Not likely, but possible. Of course, the placement of the Boy Who Lived was always more likely to raise an alarm than others.

The custody of a child was, ideally, considered a private matter. However, due to inheritance laws, a child going from the custody of a blood relative to a custodial situation with a non-relative would have to be approved by the Wizengamot. Even if the blood relative consented.

Severus ground his teeth over laws that had been written in the 16th Century.

Going from the custody of a relative to the custody of another blood relative would raise no such issues. In fact, the record would change itself with no interference from the outside. Severus only needed to get Petunia to sign.

Hopefully, in the spring, Albus could use his influence with the Wizengamot to change the custody quietly. Madam Bones was always reliable for delicate matters. It wasn't as though the boy was the first child to be conceived with the help of Occludus Paturnus. Merlin only knew how many times Severus had brewed it, in the last twelve years. He very purposely did not keep a record of it.

Few others were in a position to know how common the problem was. Women did not go to respectable healers for this.

Many an assumed Pure Blood was actually a Half Blood or the child of one. It was always tactfully hushed up, if it ever did come to light. The delicate egos of the Pure Blood males could never admit that a genetic defect caused many of them to be unable to produce children. Severus had the suspicion that the Pure Bloods who could father children had a Muggle ancestor only a generation or two back.

Severus was much more concerned with keeping this abuse business off the radar (he smiled grimly at himself for the Muggle expression). He shuddered to think of what would happen if it got out. It wasn't even the public outcry he'd mentioned to Lupin and the Ministry could go hang itself. The real problem was that the boy would probably end up in the custody of some influential family with Death Eater ties, like as not.

Moreover, Severus was not going to let Petunia collect who-knows-how-many pounds over the
course of the next school year. Severus knew that Lily had left a Muggle trust for her son, as well as whatever Gringott’s was sending from the Potter vault. Add to that, whatever Petunia was collecting from the state in the form of family allowance. No doubt, the Dursleys had their reasons for not refusing to take Harry.

After some discussion, Severus and Lupin decided they would visit the Dursleys in wizard robes, rather than attempt to pass as Muggles. After again reading the diagnostic parchment, Severus, at least, had no intention of trying to put these people at their ease.

So, Severus swept up the walk in his black robes and Lupin in robes of grey. The neighbor, mowing his lawn looked at them curiously. Both wizards steadfastly ignored him. Severus lifted his hand and knocked, loudly.

For a moment they heard nothing, then, "Petunia? Would you get the door?."

"Coming." called a woman's voice.

The door opened. A thin, horse faced woman stood there. She stared for a second, before she tried to slam the door in their faces.

Lupin was quicker and caught the door, holding it open easily.

"Hello, Tuney." said Severus unpleasantly.

All the blood seemed to drain from Petunia's face and she was pale to the lips, "You." she hissed, "Go away. Your kind isn't wanted here."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Lupin pleasantly, "But, we need to have a word about your nephew." he made no effort to keep his voice down, and the neighbor had stopped mowing the lawn. He was standing in his driveway, pretending admire his lawn. All the while, giving the wizards surreptitious glances.

"Come in, then." Petunia whispered, furiously, "Don't stand there, where the whole neighborhood can see you."

"What do you want?" demanded a large man as they came in. He was taller than Lupin, nearly as tall as Severus and seemingly as wide as he was tall, "If that boy's caused more trouble, that's your look out. That man you sent said we only had to take the boy back this year until the end of summer."

Severus assumed this was "Uncle Vernon".

"We just wanted to discuss some issues Harry's been having." Lupin continued in that conversational tone, "Perhaps it would be better to talk in the living room, rather than here where half the street can hear us."

Petunia gasped, jumped around the men and closed the door with a snap, "All right, come in here." she led them into the living room, but she didn't sit. Nor did she invite the men to.

"Well, I hope you don't have any complaints." Vernon said "I took him in hand, just as...what was his name?" Vernon looked at Petunia,

"Fudge." put in Petunia. She crossed her arms and glared at the wizards.

"Fudge. Asked me to." said Vernon, sharply, "We didn't put up with any more nonsense from him. If you can't control the brat, that's not my problem."
"So you feel your methods have been keeping him under control?" asked Lupin. His manner still pleasant and easy.

Severus was happy to let Lupin do the talking as he looked around the room obsessively neat room. Pictures hung on the walls and sat on the mantle piece. Severus noted that Potter appeared in none of them.

"No thanks to any of your lot." growled Vernon, "Did you hear what he did to my sister?"

Severus nodded.

"Actually we did." said Lupin agreeably, "I understand it was accidental magic?"

"Fudge reckoned it was accidental, but I'm not so sure of that." Vernon lifted his chin.

"Yes, it can be quite troublesome, in a teenager." Lupin sounded downright empathetic. Severus thought the man would make an excellent actor. He leaned forward with his arms crossed across his chest, the look on his face both grave and understanding.

"Little freak's done other things like it." confirmed the large man. He nodded importantly.

"Really?" now Lupin sounded as though he was encouraging the man to unburden his soul, "That must be difficult for you."

"That Fudge person. He told us the boy must have too much energy." he seemed to be warming to his subject, having found what he thought was an understanding ear.

"I see. You wanted to make sure Harry was disciplined properly?" asked Lupin, he smiled at the Dursleys. Severus knew that Lupin had to be remembering the marks on the child and all the other things the diagnostic charms had found.

Vernon seemed to feel that Lupin's smile was reassuring. Severus couldn't help but shudder, as he knew it was the snarl of the wolf, "I made sure the ungrateful whelp understood his place."

"Oh?" Lupin's hands uncrossed. He put them into his pockets, one of which held his wand. His stance was deceptively casual "Perhaps you could explain to us what you mean? It seems that his accidental magic was indeed under control for the rest of the summer. I'd certainly be interested in your methods."

Petunia made a little noise, clearing her throat. She seemed to understand that Lupin's voice held a veiled threat. Not so Vernon.

"Well, I'll show you." Vernon said stoutly, he beckoned to them.

"I'll stay here and catch up with Tuney." said Severus, giving her a dark look.

He could hear Lupin's voice asking Vernon questions and Vernon was replying, but Severus couldn't hear the words. A door opened and shut. Footsteps upstairs. The sounds of locks unlocking.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes. Petunia inched near the door, apparently trying to catch what Vernon and Lupin were saying to each other. Severus moved over to the mantelpiece to look at the fussy bric-a-brac Petunia apparently liked.

"Now, listen to me, Sev." Petunia said, nastily using the pet name that Lily had called him, after a few minutes of that. She kept her voice low, and moved closer to where the wizard stood "That little
freak was dropped on our doorstep without a by-your-leave. I didn't know from day to day if he was going to blow up the house and...

"And yet, you kept him." Severus replied, coldly. He turned his head away from the photos on the mantel to look at her again, "I know that you could have contacted Dumbledore. You could have sent the boy to the Muggle authorities. Better yet, you could have taken care of him properly." he gazed into her eyes, "I never liked you, but I know Lily thought the world of you. How is it, that you couldn't find it in your heart to care for the boy, for her sake?"

"For Lily!" exclaimed Petunia, her face going very red and her mouth twisted into an ugly sneer, "Oh, indeed, let's make sure everything is done for my perfect sister! It was always the same. Always! She never thought about me at all. When our parents died, she could hardly be bothered to come to the funeral. And then I find out that your lot were involved...How dare you? How dare you lecture me? I know what you are." she spat, spitefully.

“And what would that be?” he asked her, coldly.

“You’re one of those freaks, just like she was. Just like that boy is.” She seemed to be unable to understand how stupid it was to bait a full grown wizard.

Severus felt his face go white. He took a menacing step towards her and lifted his right fist to his left shoulder, as though to backhand her.

She squeaked and threw up her hands to protect her face.

They stood like that for about ten seconds. She, cowering almost at his feet, he, with hand raised to strike,

"Have a care, Petunia." he growled, "I daresay the rest of the Wizarding world would not be happy if I told them the injuries the boy's received at your hands." Slowly, he dropped his hand to his side, surprised at himself. It had been many years since he’d raised his hand to another person, and never to a woman

"Don't be ridiculous. It's not as if he were a normal child" she said, defensively.

"Hold your tongue, woman." Severus was having a hard time keeping to his resolve that this was not a day to seek revenge, and had heard all he could stomach.

There were footsteps outside the room, "Well, you should be pleased to hear that we came to lift this burden from you." Lupin had returned from his tour of the house evidently. Vernon was behind him.

"What do you mean?" asked Petunia, in a high pitched voice, sounding both frightened and suspicious.

"He means, that all you must do is sign this, and you never have to see the boy again." Severus said flatly, drawing the parchment out of his pocket and putting the first one back.

He held it out to Petunia, "Your sister left alternate plans. Should this placement...not work out."

The woman stared at the parchment, but made no effort to read it.

"Hmm, that's an attractive thought..." said Vernon slowly. Petunia grabbed his sleeve and tried to hiss something into his ear. He shook her off, "I'd say I need to think about it. I mean the boy's been so difficult...we've had him for over ten years” Vernon paused, his eyes glinting unpleasantly, "What about our compensation?" he asked, in a calculating manner.
"Compensation?" asked Lupin, still pleasant, still smiling that predator's grin, "If you've been receiving an allowance, it will obviously need to stop."

"Oh yes, so we get nothing for the years of support we've given the boy? I don't think so." The man drew himself up to his full height, a full head taller than Lupin, and looked down his nose at the shabby schoolteacher, "After the trouble we've been to? The..." Vernon was cut off when Lupin grabbed the larger man's lapels and slammed him against the wall.

"Listen to me," Lupin growled. He punctuated his words by thumping Vernon into the wall, three more times.

Severus was very glad that the full moon wasn't near. As it was, Lupin's eyes had taken on a yellow, feral gleam.

"You and your wife will sign that paper. When you are finished, we will leave you in peace. Otherwise, I will not bother with magic, I will rip you to pieces with my bare hands" Lupin said very softly, his voice sounding like the warning growl of a mastiff.

He let go of the man, and straightened his shabby robes, "Now, it appears we can come to an agreement?" he said, going back to his amiable demeanor.

Petunia snatched the parchment from Severus' hand, grabbed a pen off the desk and signed on the blank line.

Vernon stared at Lupin with his mouth hanging open and his face gone grey. It appeared he'd just recognized the danger he was in.

Petunia turned to him. She picked up his hand and wrapped it around the pen, "Sign it, Vernon." she pleaded, "They'll go away, if we sign it." she glared at Severus, "We won't have to see the boy again."

“Yes...” Vernon said, shakily. He pulled himself together, visibly, “Yes, I'll sign it.” He blustered. He seemed to be trying to convince himself of something. Hastily, he scribbled his initials on the paper.

Petunia snatched it from her husband and shoved the parchment into Severus' hand, "Go. Get out."

Severus countersigned it and handed to Lupin, who did the same. The parchment glowed with a golden light for a moment. The corresponding record at the Ministry would have changed.

Severus looked closely at the parchment, making sure it was all in order. Underneath the rambling legalese and the signatures, in golden ink, was the word Severus had been wagering all this nonsense on:

Approved

Because of the accident of blood, no notification would be sent to the Wizengamot. It was considered strictly a family matter. It wouldn't get out of the records room.

"Lupin, is there anything of the boy's we need to take?" Severus asked tucking the parchment back into his robes..

Lupin shook his head, "I did pick up the few things that I thought Harry might like, but on the whole, I think that everything he owns is in his school trunk." Severus didn’t miss the man’s jaw clenching.
With a withering glance to Petunia, who was clinging to Vernon's arm, Severus said, "We'll see ourselves out."

Neither of them spoke until they'd Apparated to the school boundary.

"What the Weasley boys said about locks...It was true, " Lupin finally said in a low voice, "That creature told me all about it. He didn't even have the sense to be ashamed. They were keeping a child like a prisoner."

Severus didn't stop walking, didn't even turn his head. He had never imagined Petunia was capable of what she'd done. On the other hand, if she believed "freaks" just didn't have human feelings...

He certainly did not want to discuss this with Lupin. The boy was safe. This arrangement was purely temporary and would be changed as soon as it was feasible. And now that it was done, he could sleep, without fear of Lily haunting his dreams.

"Why do you suppose, he's never...?" Lupin trailed off, sounding as though he were speaking to himself.

"Never what?" asked Severus sharply. He disliked people who maundered like that.

"Well...never told anyone?"

Severus did stop now, the realization hitting him like a blow to the stomach, "He did. He told Shacklebolt." Severus tried to remember exactly what the man had said, "And then the Minister." Severus found himself repeating every one of his father's curses in his head, one after another.

Lupin faced Severus, horrified, "Harry's Uncle said he'd spoken to Fudge. The Minister took Harry back. Dumbledore told me; they were so afraid Black would find the boy away from his guardian's home. The Minister must have told them to..."

"Use a 'firm hand' to discipline the boy. And keep him from running away again." Finished Severus, bitterly, "I have no doubt the boy believes his treatment was sanctioned by Dumbledore as well.

"No wonder he was so reluctant." said Lupin, he passed a shaking hand over his face, "It's a wonder Lily and James haven't come back to haunt us."

Severus sighed. Lily had appeared several times to him, this week, in his dreams. She never spoke, just looked at him with sad green eyes.

He hadn't gotten much sleep this week.
A New Friend

Chapter Summary

Some fluff before the storm.

The stasis charm Hermione had given him was, as far as Harry was concerned, one of the best bits of magic he'd every learned. Because of the stash of food he'd stored in his trunk, he was able to avoid going down to the Great Hall for meals all day Saturday and Sunday.

Sunday, before any of his dorm mates were up, he grabbed a couple of pumpkin pasties that he'd bought on the train and headed off to the far side of the lake. He stayed well back from the boundary of the grounds, mindful that Dumbledore had warned them that the Dementors would be patrolling the boundaries. Harry had no desire to meet one of those horrible things again.

By the afternoon, the book he'd been reading began to get boring. He'd been reading in a sheltered little hollow, but now he got up to walk aimlessly down to the lake. He kept an eye out for fellow students especially Ron or Hermione, having no interest in conversation with any of them.

He knew he was being stupid. They meant well. They wouldn't have said anything if they weren't worried. They were only worried because they cared.

There was nothing to worry about, though. He just needed to explain to them that it was fine. It was only Uncle Vernon, after all. He'd been lots worse when Harry was younger. It was only because Harry had blown up Aunt Marge that Vernon had been so angry at the end of the summer.

When Harry thought of talking to them about it, it felt as though his skin were going to crawl off his bones from sheer embarrassment. He'd taken on a basilisk and a Voldemort-possessed Quirrel, but they thought he couldn't cope with Uncle Vernon?

Doubtless, Hermione would figure out why Harry wasn't talking to them all weekend. She'd be all apologetic, but she'd still be hurt. She'd want to know all about what he'd been thinking. And Ron would just be annoyed.

Irritably, he picked up a rock and threw it into the lake. He'd have to go to class tomorrow. He'd have to talk to them and listen to their reasoning and try to allay their concerns.

It was just so maddening.

A movement caught his eye and he turned, sighing because he assumed the black he saw out of the corner of his eye was a school uniform; that someone had caught up with him out here.

Instead it was a huge black dog sitting several yards away, looking at him with interest.

It sat with its' head tilted sideways and its tongue lolling out. Its' shaggy fur was rough and it was skinny. No collar that Harry could see.

"Where'd you come from, then?" asked Harry, in a soft voice. "Are you a new one of Hagrid's?"

The dog seemed tame enough, sitting calmly like that.
The dog's ears went up. It shut its' mouth and stood, sniffing the air tentatively.

It was so very thin. Harry pulled one of his pasties out of his pocket, "Hungry, boy? Girl? Whatever?"

The dog took a tentative step towards him. Harry tossed a piece into the air, not stupid enough to let a strange dog take food from his hand. He'd had enough dog bites, thanks to Aunt Marge's nasty little yap dogs. This dog could have Harry's hand off at the elbow, and not even notice.

The dog caught the chunk deftly, licking its' chops. Another bit followed and then another. The dog wriggled with delight each time he caught a bit of food.

Harry grinned at the dogs antics. He threw the food higher just to watch the great animal leap to catch it. Before Harry knew it he'd fed the dog everything he had in his pocket. No matter, he had more food in his trunk.

Harry stuck out his hand palm up, so the dog came over and sniffed it. He (Harry had decided it was a "he", observing it jumping) really was huge, his head easily reaching Harry's waist. He sat down docilely enough though when Harry gave it a scratch behind the ear.

He had better manners than Fang, Hagrid's dog. He didn't try to climb or jump up. Now that he had had some food, he seemed intent on taking a nap in the sun. He stood and turned around a couple of times, then lay down in the grass, looking at Harry in seeming invitation.

Harry sat down cross legged near the dog, who scooted up to him on his tummy and plonked his heavy head in his lap. The young wizard laughed and scratched behind the dog's shaggy ears, "I see. I've fed you and you're mine for life, is that it?"

In answer, the dog thumped his tail.

"So, what do I call you?" he asked the dog rhetorically, "Blackie?"

The dog seemed to look on him with reproach. He snuffled into Harry's hand, demanding more scratches.

"Noser? Snuffles?"

The dog sneezed.

"Snuffles it is, then." said Harry wiping his hand off on the dog's fur.

The dog licked his face so hard his glasses came off, "Hey, careful." protested Harry, retrieving them.

The dog seemed contrite, whining in apology. He settled his head back down on Harry's lap.

The dog was much better company than anyone else he could think of. The dog wouldn't ask him questions or look at him pityingly. He was just a comforting presence, like Hedwig was. Something living and warm that Harry could hold on to.

He thought he'd like to take Snuffles back to the Dursleys with him. Snuffles could eat Marge's dog, Ripper, with one bite.

Petting the dog seemed to make something tight and cold loosen inside of Harry's stomach. He relaxed, put his legs out and leaned back on his hands, in the sun. The dog shifted around so that his
black head rested on his thighs. After a few minutes, the dog raised his head to lick Harry's face again. This time, much more gently, as though to wipe away the tear that had spilled down the side of his cheek.

Harry shook his head a little. That was ridiculous, and anyway, he hadn't really been crying.

"It's been a bad week," Harry admitted to the dog, hoarsely. "I mean, Neville," He swallowed. "It's horrible." He stopped. Snuffles sat patiently.

"And then I don't know what to make of Lupin and Snape." Harry imagined that the dog looked at him inquiringly. "Hermione and Ron told Lupin that they were worried about the marks Uncle Vernon left on me this summer. Hermione always worries about things and I guess she got Ron all wound up. Well then, Snape insisted on doing my medical exam himself. They seemed really upset that Uncle Vernon caned me. Lupin did, anyway. Snape just seemed hacked off. But then, Snape is always hacked off at me for something."

He fell silent, thinking. Snuffles must have liked the sound of Harry's voice, because he nosed at him impatiently when he stopped speaking. The boy smiled at his own fancies, but said, "Snape teaches potions. He hates me. Apparently he hated my dad. Dumbledore said that he did, anyway. But he was really...I don't know...decent? About the whole exam thing. Not that I skived it off, but when he said he wouldn't make a fuss about what it showed." He thought about it. "No, he said he wouldn't mention it to anybody else. Do you think that's the same thing?"

Snuffles looked at him with wise, sad eyes.

"Anyway," Harry went on, "Snape said he wouldn't say anything, but Lupin said something about talking to the Dursleys." Snuffles gave him another one of those questioning looks, "Oh, Lupin's the new Defense against the Dark Arts teacher. I don't know anything about him. Except..." He trailed off, thinking about the first time he'd seen Lupin. It had been the last time he'd seen Neville.

Unbidden, the memory of the terrible cold and the cloaked horror of the Dementor floated into Harry's consciousness. It was all over the school, that they had contributed to Neville's death. Harry couldn't help wondering if, as ill as Neville had been, the Dementor had just simply sucked the life out of him.

No, not the life. Everyone said that the dementors sucked the hope and happiness out of a place. They left you with all your worst memories, Fred and George had said. Merlin knew that Neville had had precious little happiness in his life. If the Dementor had sucked it all out of him, could it be that he'd just given up? Could someone die that way? Just from giving up?

The dog whined and licked his face again. He remembered what he'd been saying, feeling like the dog was the most understanding listener he'd ever had. "If Lupin does say something to the Dursleys, I don't know what I'll do." Harry shuddered, thinking about it. "It was worse this summer, after I ran off. The Minister brought me back to the house. I told him that Uncle Vernon was probably going to give me a hiding. He seemed to think I needed it. He said that if I were his, I'd be in for it too. Same as Marge did" without thinking he tightened his hands in the fur of the dog's neck. "Vernon will just tell Lupin how much trouble I am. It's not as if Snape will contradict him. I'll be lucky if Lupin doesn't give me a detention just for existing. And I don't even want to think about what it'll be like next summer."

The dog made a noise in his throat that might have been a growl. Harry let go of his fur, "Sorry." he smoothed down the ruffled fur and the dog relaxed.

"I wish I didn't have to go back there." Harry said, aware of the whine in his voice. Another reason...
the dog made such a good listener. He didn't need to censor himself for Snuffles' benefit. He didn't have to pretend that the situation was in any way all right to avoid him worrying. "They really hate me. Can't blame them, they got stuck with me. I just messed their lives up. They'd be really pleased if I never went back, but where else would I go?" Harry sighed.

The dog sighed too, as if sadly. Probably in answer to the despondent tone in Harry's voice.

Harry wondered if the big stray was some wizard's familiar, who had gotten lost. He seemed more intelligent than the average dog, but most animals who were familiars tended to be. Well, except for Fang, maybe.

Then too, his only other experience with dogs were Marge's. She had let her favorite one, Ripper, chase him into a tree when he was five. Until he'd met Fang, he'd never liked dogs. Now the only dogs he really liked were the enormous ones.

Snuffles couldn't belong to a student though, he was too big to keep in the dorms. Perhaps Lupin's? No, the dog looked too unkempt and hungry to have been lost recently. It was very likely that Hagrid had brought the dog back to look after him, until an owner could be found. Hagrid just must not have had him long enough to fatten up.

"Come on." said Harry after a long time, "I expect I should get you back to Hagrid's." he started to move, only to discover that both his legs had fallen to sleep under the weight of the dog's head, "Let's go. Shift." He gave Snuffles' head a shove.

The dog jumped up and Harry staggered to his feet on legs that were tingling and buzzing. He stomped his feet to bring some blood back into them.

"C'mon, then." Harry called, but the dog took off in the other direction, towards the Forest. So maybe not from Hagrid's. He'd had never seen an animal yet, who had known Hagrid who wasn't happy to go there.

He watched the black streak race away. He'd have to remember to nick some food and bring it out here for the poor thin thing. Maybe it would come back. Harry hoped so. He thought he'd like to see Snuffles again.
Guardian

Chapter Summary

Harry finds out who his new guardian is.

The child never ate.

Five meals Severus had taken in the Great Hall on Saturday and Sunday, and the child was at none of them. Once again he checked with the house elves and they had not seen the boy.

Weasley and Granger were there. At each one, Granger kept looking around, as if searching the room. He could only conclude that the pair hadn't seen Potter either.

The house elves were making themselves useful by keeping watch on the boy. One of them said he spent the weekend reading, mostly out on the far side of the lake. For once in his life, being careful to stay in bounds. And he was actually in bed every night, according to the same house elf.

If the child didn't appear for breakfast Monday morning, Severus was prepared to drag him there. While it was true that upset might make a child lose their appetite, it was ridiculous for the boy to not eat for days on end.

But no, there he was, slinking into the Great Hall, Monday morning. Rather earlier than usual and without his two sidekicks. That was interesting.

Potter must have felt Severus' gaze. He looked furtively at the professor who looked back steadily, with what he hoped was a neutral expression. Potter flinched and looked away. Apparently, his expression must have been closer to a scowl.

Picking up his tea, Severus resolutely turned his attention to his own food. He knew he had to tell Potter, today.

He'd avoided it all weekend, perhaps hoping that Minerva and Albus would have returned and could have helped him break it to the child.

But, of course, they were both staying in London to help with the Ministry investigation and to see to Augusta. Dumbledore's owl this morning had indicated that he had "every confidence" in Severus' capabilities as interim headmaster.

That was bloody effing brilliant, that was.

Severus occasionally fell back to his childhood speech patterns, in his mind. Sometimes, he found that all his hard won polish just couldn't do justice to a given situation.

It wouldn't have been quite so bad, if Poppy wasn't also gone. As it was, Pomona was filling in for her, leaving Flitwick and Lupin splitting up Minerva's duties between them. Flitwick was most complimentary of the new professor's abilities, which made Severus grind his teeth. He was going to end up needing new teeth, at this rate.

The first Potions class of the day, was also the one Potter was in. Severus resolved he would tell the
child then, since the following class was Severus' free period and the one after that were his seventh years who could cope with merely a recipe on the board and instructions to continue to work on the research assignments they were carrying over from last year.

If this discussion took longer than that, Severus would have more important troubles. However, much Severus wanted to keep the conversation short, the boy would doubtless have questions about the change in guardian, that would need to be answered.

The Weasley boys and Granger walked into the Great Hall, together. Potter must have been watching for them. He snatched a handful of sausages off the table, pulled out a Muggle plastic bag. He dropped them into it, then ducked under the table, disappearing.

Potter was using the invisibility cloak to avoid his friends? That was very interesting.

Severus made quick work of his meal after that. When he arrived at his classroom, he was again surprised by Potter. He was in the hallway outside, reading a Potions book that looked so new, that his owl must have brought it that morning.

The Professor unlocked his classroom, merely nodding to the child, in greeting (which was more than he did most days).

Potter took his usual table, seemed to change his mind abruptly, choosing to actually move up towards the front of the room.

Severus wondered why, then realized Potter, Weasley and Granger had shared that one with Longbottom.

Potter saw Severus looking and raised his chin a little, as if daring the professor to comment. Severus said nothing and the awkward moment passed when Granger and Weasley came stomping in.

"Harry!" said the bushy haired witch, "Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Studying." Potter replied sullenly, without really looking at her.

"Harry, mate listen..." started Weasley, quietly, urgently, but with a wheedling undertone. Granger poked him in the ribs. She nodded at Severus who pretended to be reading the parchments on his desks.

"Listen," Weasley went on, in a far more casual manner, "Let's talk about it at lunch, okay?"

Potter nodded, but his eyes were hard. Severus would have wagered a hundred galleons that Potter would be anywhere but the Great Hall at lunch time.

The other Gryffindors and the Slytherins trooped in. Weasley and Granger stayed at the table with Potter. For his part, he steadfastly ignored them.

The class went well enough. Everyone was subdued. Brown and Patil kept glancing at the table Longbottom used to occupy, looking rather tearful. The rest avoided looking at it altogether. Severus decided he would get rid of that table. It had a huge stain on it where Longbottom had melted a cauldron, most spectacularly, last year.

When the class was dismissed and packing up, Severus called out, "Mr. Potter? I need a word." he tried to make his voice as unthreatening as possible, but he was tense.

Weasley looked like he wanted to stay, so Severus said, "This doesn't concern you, Weasley. Go tell
whoever the teacher of your next class is, that Mr. Potter will be along soon."

Weasley nodded, uncertainly looking at first Potter, then Granger. Granger pulled him by the sleeve.

Severus flicked the door closed with his wand. On further thought, he locked it.

"Sit down, Potter." he told the boy. He pulled up one of the lab stools for himself. The child looked wary.

Severus tucked his wand away and folded his hands on the table. He waited until the child was actually looking at him, "I thought you should know, Potter. I have spoken to the Dursleys."

"What for, sir?" that had to be the most polite Severus had ever heard Potter be.

"We discussed the findings of your medical exam." Severus said, calmly, "And the treatment you receive, while you are in their custody."

Panic bloomed in the boy's eyes, his face losing color, but he only asked, "So...what did they say?"

"Frankly, their answers were not satisfactory." Severus paused, "I will not deny that I found them to be appalling people."

Perhaps, the boy smiled for a millisecond. But then his hands curled into fists on the table. Severus wondered if he was trying to prevent himself trembling.

"It appears that they are unfit to be guardians to a wizard child. That being so, I have arranged your guardianship to be transferred here, to myself." Severus watched the boy's face carefully as he spoke. It was now so still, it could have been a mask, "Since I am acting headmaster, I was able to handle it discreetly. Without involving the Ministry, as you requested."

A long silence. The boy stared at the teacher with that impassive expression. Finally Potter asked in a tight voice, "Does this mean I don't have to go back to the Dursleys next summer?"

"That is precisely what it means." replied Severus.

Potter seemed to go over the rest of what Severus had said, in his mind, "You transferred it...my guardianship or whatever...to-to you?"

Ah, now it comes, "Yes, Potter. At the moment I am your guardian. I assure you, it is only temporary, until we can find someone more suitable. For now, it seemed the correct thing to do." Severus waited for the inevitable explosion.

Harry's eyes became huge, but he didn't say a word.

"I'm sure you have questions. I'm quite disposed to answer them." prodded Severus.

The boy cleared his throat and answered stoutly, "No, sir. No questions." Out went the Potter chin.

But those green eyes were wet and frightened. Then, they went curiously flat, "Is that all, sir?" he asked, in a strained voice.

Severus was taken aback, he had expected tears, rages, relief, fear; anything but this strange withdrawal.

"I understand this is a lot for you to take in." Severus said, trying to be sympathetic (he knew he was terrible at it), "We can discuss the particulars later."
"Yes, sir. May I go now?" the boy's voice sounding even more strained.

With concern, the Potion Master saw that the boy had turned a delicate shade of green. Severus belatedly remembered Lily's nervous stomach. How she threw up before her O.W.L.s. How she'd written him to tell him she knew she was pregnant, when she'd gotten sick every morning that first week.

"Off you go, then." Severus told him. He opened the door with a flick of his wand.

The boy fled. Severus followed quietly.

As expected, he'd gone into the boy's bathroom.

For a few minutes, Severus stood in the corridor, considering who he could get to look after the boy. With Poppy gone, it was difficult to know.

If it were something serious, he could ask Pomona. But really, it was more than likely the result of emotional upset after the first decent meal the child had eaten in days.

For a second, he considered asking Lupin, since he was Harry's acting head of house. Unfortunately, Lupin had enough on his plate with teaching brand new classes and filling in for Minerva. Severus also knew the man's teaching schedule; he had the third years right now. They couldn't be left alone without fear of blowing each other up.

There was nothing else for it, and as the child's guardian, it was ultimately Severus' responsibility.

Sighing, he opened the door. That morning's meal hadn't done the child any good, judging by Potter's state.

Potter knelt on the floor, with his head resting on the cool porcelain of the toilet. He was shaking and wiping off his mouth with the sleeve of his robe. His eyes were tightly closed and he had taken his glasses off, laying them beside him on the floor. Severus noted that they were held together with little more than spells. That was something that had to be sorted, soon.

Hearing the door close, the boy's eyes snapped open and he squinted at Severus, "What?" Potter snarled, obviously not realizing who was there, "I'm bloody fine. Go away." Probably the boy assumed that Severus' black robes were a prefect's uniform.

"Yes, Potter, clearly," he replied sardonically, unable to help himself.

In answer, the boy threw up, again.

Severus tutted and conjured a wet cloth. He knelt down beside the sick child and wiped his forehead.

The boy's heaving continued even after his stomach was empty.

Again, Severus was reminded irresistibly of Lily. The first time they had gotten drunk together, they had been fifteen. Lily's parents were gone for the weekend and eighteen year old Petunia had left Lily to her own devices, telling her not to tell their parents that she'd gone.

He had stolen some of his father's cider from the fridge and they'd spent the afternoon getting drunk, down at the river. It was a wonder they'd made it back to Lily's house.

Severus had had a little more experience with drinking than Lily, so he knew to pace himself. He hadn't been too badly off, but Lily had been in rough shape. He remembered sitting with Lily, just
like this, holding her hair up, so it didn't get in the way. She had heaved like this, until Severus had finally left her long enough to go beg for a stomach calming draft from his mother. Telling his mother that Lily must have the stomach flu and Muggles didn't have anything to treat it with. His mum may not have believed him, but she'd given him the potion.

He hadn't even gotten in trouble for staying the night at the Evans'. When he'd wandered home in the morning, his father had merely smirked.

Severus firmly banished that memory.

Noting that Potter's shivering had gotten worse, he conjured a blanket to put around him.

His hair wasn't long enough to need holding up, but Severus left his hand on the boy's forehead until the spasms subsided, while he rubbed the boy's back.

Severus considered a stomach calming draft, but given that this was probably all nerves, the boy would be better off with some rest and perhaps a light meal, later. If he couldn't keep that down, Severus would give him a potion. He could excuse the boy from classes for the rest of the day, since none of the teachers had a particularly demanding day planned.

"Stay there, Potter." said Severus, unnecessarily. The boy didn't look as though he planned to go anywhere. He had put his forehead back onto the porcelain of the toilet.

Severus put his head out into the corridor, with any luck, one of Potter's cronies would be hanging about.

"Miss Weasley?" called the potion master, spotting a bit of red hair coming out of his classroom and going down the hall.

"Sir?" she squeaked, spinning around.

"Mr. Potter is ill. Would you see him back to Gryffindor tower? I'll write you a pass for your next class." he said in a clipped voice.

"Oh." she turned red, "Yes, sir."

"Wait there." Severus told her. He turned around, walked back to kneel down beside the boy,

"Potter, do you think you can make it back to your dorm, now?"

"I have classes." he muttered, mulishly.

Severus rolled his eyes, trust Potter to be contrary. "I'm sure you're a stellar pupil, in this state." he said sarcastically, "Nevertheless, I want you to lie down for the morning. I'll have a house elf bring you up some lunch. If you can keep it down, go to your afternoon classes. Otherwise, have the house elf check in with me and I'll send up a potion." he finished briskly.

The boy just nodded, capitulating.

Since he was done heaving for the moment, Severus helped him stand and gave him his glasses back. Potter gave Severus an unreadable look, as he took them.

Potter unwrapped himself from the blanket and held it out, "Thank you." he muttered.

Severus grunted, waving his wand and vanishing it.
He walked the boy out to the corridor, where Miss Weasley was waiting, "Make sure he goes straight to bed." Severus told her.

"Yes, sir." she said, quietly as she led the still-shivering Potter down the hall.

He had to smile a little to himself, when the Weasley girl whispered to Potter, "Who was that and what did he do with Snape?"

"You have no idea." mumbled Potter back, thickly.
The changes in Harry's circumstances begin to sink in.

"Harry?" a hand insistently shook him, "Harry, wake up."

"Go 'way, Hermione," Harry complained, "'M tired." It was warm and comfortable to lie here. He didn't need to be up yet, so why was she bothering him?

"Professor Lupin asked me to check on you. He said you were ill," she replied concerned, "He also said you should eat something. Someone's brought you up some soup."

Harry opened his eyes. He saw the blurry outline of the common room and Hermione standing beside the settee he was laying on. He'd tossed his robe over the back, as if this were as far as he'd been able to get, before he'd fallen asleep.

Someone sent up food? That was nice. He was a little hungry, come to think of it. He seemed to remember having a difficult morning. Something about Snape and...

Memory suddenly caught up to Harry's sleepy brain.

"Oh, bloody hell." He sat bolt upright, on the couch. He grabbed his glasses off the side table, where he'd left them. He jumped up, looking around wildly. It seemed they were the only ones here.

"Harry?" asked Hermione, "What's wrong?" she backed up, startled.

When Ginny had brought him back, Harry had felt so exhausted that he'd just flopped onto the nearest likely looking spot. He had fallen so deeply asleep that, for a moment, he had trouble sorting dream from waking. Now that he was properly awake, he wished that morning had been a bad dream.

He turned to Hermione, "What did you tell Lupin?" he asked in a hard voice. This was her fault. If she hadn't opened her mouth, hadn't stuck her nose in where it didn't belong, he could have glossed the whole exam thing over, he was convinced.

She stared at him, "Well, I told him about the bruises on your arm." Hermione said, quietly, "And how they don't feed you properly."

Harry stared at her, "You had no right." he said in a low voice.

"I was worried about you." she crossed her arms across her chest, hugging herself, "Why? What happened?"

"You had no right, at all." he repeated, his voice cracking.

"Harry?" said Hermione, cautiously. She uncrossed her arms and moved forward as if she were going to put one hand on his shoulder.
Harry felt himself start to tremble. He backed up, out of her reach, until the back of his knees hit the settee, breathing rapidly.

Every time. Every time this happened. Every time anyone complained about Harry's treatment at the Dursleys, it just made things worse.

He sank onto the couch, covering his face with his hands.

"Are you okay?" Hermione's voice sounded distant, and there was a roaring in his ears. He shook his head sharply. He'd been less okay before, but not often.

"Snape's my bloody guardian." Harry said through his hands. He couldn't see Hermione's face, but her lack of response told him she was not expecting to hear that.

The full import of the thing hit him, as he said it out loud.

Snape was going to be his guardian. What did that mean? Did it mean that next time Snape gave him detention, he could give him a hiding as well? A teacher striking a student was against school rules, but a guardian could dish out any punishment they wanted, as Vernon so often had reminded Harry.

The one shaft of hope was, that Snape said it would be temporary. Maybe, when Dumbledore got back, he'd fix it.

Yes, but Harry had a suspicion that Dumbledore had sent him to stay with the Dursleys in the first place.

And certainly, Dumbledore had sent him back this summer. The Minister had said as much.

And he'd nearly upchucked on the Snape's shoes.

Did it make it better or worse that he hadn't? It would have been a way to retaliate to the man's snide taunts with minimal consequences. He'd done it in front of Aunt Petunia once. She'd merely handed him a scrub brush, and with a disgusted voice, told him to scrub the floor. That was the last time he hadn't made it to the toilet (or bucket, if he was being punished).

"I'm sure you have questions." Snape had said.

Harry had about a million questions, but as he had opened his mouth to ask them, Aunt Petunia's voice rang through his mind, snapping, "Don't ask questions."

Questions were never all right. Questions got you slapped and sent to your cupboard. Questions were dangerous. You were better off just taking what you were given. The first rule and the last was "Don't ask questions."

As Professor Snape spoke, Harry could see Petunia very clearly in his mind's eye. She was in a fussy blue frock as she and Vernon and Dudley had gotten ready to go somewhere. Angered by his repeated questions, she slapped him hard. Hard enough to make him stagger, dizzily, "Don't ask questions." She had said, sharply, "I've told you before. Freaks don't get to ask questions." Then she'd slapped him again, hard enough to knock him off his feet. The memory ended there, like it was just turned off and Snape was sitting in front of him, waiting for a reply.

A wave of nausea had overtaken him, "No, sir. No questions." he said, like he might say it to Vernon. He wasn't stupid enough to get sucked in to that trap.

"Can I go now?" he had no idea of what Snape's reaction would be, if he just fled the room. It had
been all he could do to reach the bathroom, without losing his breakfast in the corridor. That would have been utterly humiliating.

It had been a long time since he'd had that particular reaction, probably not since before he came to Hogwarts. Aunt Petunia had always been pretty clear that she had no time for sick freaks. And it was a lot worse if she thought he was shamming.

A few times he'd done this in school; mostly before a test or when he knew that Dudley's gang had something particularly unpleasant in store for him. He was careful to not let the teachers know, because he didn't like to get sent home. Generally, the fit passed after he'd emptied his stomach and, although he was tired for the rest of the day, he could muddle his way through.

Snape had been so odd about Harry being sick, though.

When he'd come in the door, Harry had assumed it was a fellow student. When he had heard Snape's voice, his stomach had turned over, making him vomit so hard, he thought his guts were going to come up, as well.

Snape had merely made an irritable noise, rather than shouting. He had wiped Harry's face and given him a blanket. He'd seemed a little put out, but not angry. He'd given Harry the day off. Although, that was probably because the other teachers would object if he were to be throwing up in their classes too.

But, really, why had he come in at all? Harry even seemed to have a vague recollection of the man's hand holding his head while he heaved. What on earth was that about? He would have expected, at best, for Snape to shove a potion into his hand and tell him to clean himself up. Not to rub his back and send him to bed, for Merlin's sake. That was how people acted with normal children.

His head hurt and his heart was pounding, like he'd run a mile and he wasn't sure why. He lowered his head right onto his knees, trying to slow his breathing. If he kept doing this he'd be sick again and that was the last thing he wanted.

"Harry." Hermione's voice was worried now, "Tell me what happened." she asked again.

"Snape." He didn't lift his head, "He got the Dursleys to stop being my guardians, somehow."

It was a moment before she replied. She sounded uncertain, when she did, "Well...that's good isn't it?" she asked slowly, "I know you hate them."

"Didn't you hear me?" Harry laughed, a high pitched, hysterical sound, "Snape's going to be my guardian. Tell me, how is that going to be better? He hates me" he sucked in a ragged breath, "At least with my Aunt and Uncle they didn't have it in for me, from the word 'go'. I just kept bollixing things up. When I do that with Snape, he'll kill me."

Would he have to live with Snape now, in the summer, when they couldn't find someone who wanted him?

Because, that's what this was about, wasn't it? No one wanted him. Oh naturally, Snape assumed that many people would want to take in the Boy Who Lived. In Harry's experience, to the Wizarding World, he was more a symbol than a person. No, there would be a lot of people making noises that they wished they could take him, but...

Oh, Snape would be livid when he found out he was stuck with Harry.

What would he do? With a bit of luck Snape wouldn't chop Harry up into potion ingredients, but
surely he'd make his life as miserable as possible. At least with the Dursleys, Harry had been able to escape them for the last two school years. Snape was going to haunt his every step.

Harry swore into his arms, trying to calm down. Think rationally. His brain felt locked in gear and it wouldn't slow down. He was less afraid, now, that he was going to make himself sick, and more afraid his heart was going to explode.

A tiny, rational voice in Harry's head reminded him that Snape had saved his life, more than once. He'd kept his word and he'd removed him from the Dursleys' custody without involving the Ministry. He'd actually treated Harry rather decently since this whole mess started.

In some ways that was more frightening. He didn't know when the other shoe would drop.

Hermione's hand was on his shoulder. She sat next to him on the settee. The common room was quiet, without even the sound of the fire crackling. Harry's own harsh, rapid breathing was all he could hear.

"Calm down," she said softly, after a few more minutes, "It'll be fine."

"WHAT PART OF THIS IS FINE?" He uncoiled violently, throwing off her hand. He jumped to his feet and shouted down at her as she sat, "How is it going to be FINE? WHY THE HELL DID YOU HAVE TO GO SNEAKING OFF TO A TEACHER?" he finished up, about three inches from her face.

Her face was very white, and she shrunk away against the back of the settee. "Because I didn't want you to end up like Neville." she replied in a small, brittle voice.

Harry stopped, deflated, suddenly aware of what he was doing. This was Vernon's favorite trick, to stand over someone and shout.

He fell back, staring at her frightened eyes as they filled with tears. He couldn't think of what to say, "Hermione..." he whispered, "I..."

She made a noise that sounded like a dry sob as she stood up. He heard her start crying in earnest as she pushed past him and fled out of the portrait hole.

"Damn it." said Harry, to the empty room. The adrenaline drained out of Harry, leaving him feeling empty and cold.

His eye fell on the bowl of soup and a plate of sandwiches that sat on the table. He looked at it, thinking it over. If he chased after Hermione now, they'd just end up arguing more. Knowing her, she might even hex him.

Also, he was sort of hungry.

He sighed, walking over to the table, pulling up a chair.

The soup smelled good. There was a warming charm on it and steam rose invitingly from it. After a few tentative spoonfuls, Harry's stomach began to appreciate the warm food. The rest of the soup followed more quickly. Half a sandwich was all he could manage of the solid food, though. The rest he decided to walk up to his dorm to put in the stasis box in his trunk. He might not go to dinner tonight, either.

He didn't like to face Hermione again. He more than a little ashamed, thinking of Hermione's tearful face. The longer he thought about it, the more ashamed he became.
He was still resentful that she'd said anything, but he should have known that she'd go there, in her head. Her mind was full of worst case scenarios. She always had a million reasons why things would turn out badly. And she always seemed to think that going to teachers was a good idea.

Harry really hoped that Hermione wouldn't mention it to anyone else, either their argument or what he'd told her. Chances were, she'd only tell Ron, though.

As he tucked the extra sandwiches away, he looked at his watch. It was almost time for his next class. He decided he'd go, even if he did have a free pass to skive. Staying here alone was suddenly intolerable. If he stayed here, Hermione would more than likely send Ron in and he'd have to talk to him. He really didn't want to have this conversation with Ron. Paradoxically, he was less likely to have to talk to anyone if he was at class.

He also feared Snape himself might come to check on him. He seemed to remember Snape telling him he would.

He nearly ran into Ginny, who was coming out of the girl's dormitory, as he hurried down the stairs, back to the common room.

"Whoa! Sorry, Ginny." Harry said, catching her arm to stop her from losing her balance.

"Thanks, Harry." she said. She smiled at him, rather wanly.

"You all right?" asked Harry, wondering why she was still in Gryffindor tower. He hoped she hadn't been up there the whole time and heard him arguing with Hermione (well, his shouting at Hermione, anyway).

"Fine." she shrugged. If she had heard, she wasn't going to ask him about it. Ginny was good like that.

"Just needed something from my dormitory. See you." she headed back up the stairs.

As he walked through the common room, he picked up his robe and book bag, checking to see that Snuffles' sausages were still there. He'd go look for the dog after class.
As Harry sat down to the table in the Great Hall, he heard the tell-tale ping of one of the screws in the frames of his glasses falling out onto the table and rolling away.

He caught it, more by instinct than anything else, before it rolled off the table to become hopelessly lost on the floor. Sometimes, he thought that was why he was such a good Seeker. If he lost those damned screws, he’d get stuck being half blind.

Harry wasn’t sure, but he thought he was repairing his glasses more often this year, than last. When he was on Privet Drive, he generally held them together with masking tape, but as soon as he got on the train, he’d repaired them with magic. It seemed he’d already done it about three times this week.

Since he wasn’t talking to Hermione, he wasn’t about to ask her to fix them for him. He wanted to apologize for shouting at her, but he still couldn’t get away from the fact that she’d told on him. In fact, he was afraid if he spoke to her about it, he’d end up shouting some more. He kept going around and around about it in his head.

The night before, Harry had skipped dinner again, instead eating the sandwiches left over from his lunch. He’d gone in search of Snuffles, who had come bounding out of the Forest at Harry’s whistle. This time, the dog had only stayed long enough to eat the sausages Harry had saved for him, before he’d spotted a squirrel or something and had shot away after it.

This morning, Harry came down to breakfast early, again. He couldn’t sleep anyway, so he might as well head off to breakfast at the earliest opportunity. It would also mean he could avoid Ron, who never came down until the last minute.

There were only a handful of people here this early. Most of the students at the Gryffindor table were sixth and seventh years, including Oliver, whom Harry knew liked to get some practice in before class, and Percy, who was deep into studying. Ginny was there too, but she was already on her way out.

Snape and Flitwick were the only staff, at the table. Somehow, Harry had never thought of Snape as a morning person. Perhaps he wasn’t, given the scowl he perpetually wore.

Harry realized when he sat down, that breakfast wasn’t worth his time, though. His stomach was in knots, knowing that they had double potions first thing.

Harry pretended not to notice Snape’s eyes upon him. He refused to look up at the staff table to confirm this impression; instead he worked on fixing his glasses. The stupid little screw wouldn’t stay in, no matter how much magic he used. Finally, irritated, he transfigured a bit of pocket lint into some masking tape.

Glasses sufficiently fixed for the moment, he drank a cup of tea, ate half a piece of toast and slid a handful of sausages into his bag for Snuffles.

He knew Snape was watching him, as he left the hall. He didn’t like to pull out his invisibility cloak with Snape’s eyes on him. The man might try to confiscate it. He thought he’d duck just out of sight and then he’d be able to disappear into the library for the next hour and a half before class.

“Potter.” the man called as Harry reached the archway that led into the corridor, beyond, “I need a word.”
Harry froze. Snape must have gotten up from the table at the same time Harry had. Harry always forgot how quick the man was. He did not want to have a conversation with Snape. He wanted to pretend that they hadn’t spoken yesterday. He, rather stupidly, stood with with his back to the man. He felt unable to turn around, as if Snape had cast a hex that rooted him to the floor, rather than merely calling his name.

“What...what about?” Harry asked softly, studying the grey stone of the archway.

He felt the man walk up behind him. Snape’s footsteps were completely silent, but Harry could feel his nearness. He waited for the man to grab him by the collar or arm, bracing himself for it.

After a second, the pressure of a finger on Harry’s shoulder turned him around, slowly. Harry held his breath as he gave into that pressure, to face his new guardian. He swallowed hard, gathering what courage he could to return Snape’s gaze.

Snape was looking at Harry contemplatively, but with a curl of his lip. He absentmindedly put his finger to his mouth as he gazed down at Harry; as though Harry were an especially interesting bug. One that, perhaps, had magical properties, but was weird and disgusting nonetheless.

“What?” Harry asked, again. This time quite sharply, taking a step back and bumping the column of the archway.

The Potion Master’s eyebrows went up, and he crossed his arms. He raised his chin a little, so he looked even taller and more intimidating.

“Sir.” Harry added quickly, not wanting to get his ear cuffed (or worse) for insolence.

It must have been the right thing to say, Snape relaxed ever so slightly, “You have not been eating.”

That wasn’t what Harry expected, “Sorry?”

“You haven’t been eating, Mr. Potter. In the past three days, I have seen you at two meals. I had food sent up yesterday at lunch, that I was reliably informed was half eaten. This morning you had one cup of tea and half a piece of toast.” He stood there looking as if he expected Harry to reply.

“Er--yeah. So?” Harry said, blankly. There wasn’t any rule that said Harry had to go to meals.

Snape rolled his eyes, “You are underweight, Potter. And suffering from several nutritional deficiencies. I would like to know: why you are missing meals?”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t about to tell Snape that he was avoiding Ron and Hermione. Nor was he going to tell him that he was accustomed to missing meals, or that his appetite often vanished when he was upset. Or the last month or so had been one of the most upsetting times of his life.

“The attack of nerves, I witnessed yesterday. Is this something that happens often?” Snape asked in a low voice, because several students were walking past them.

Harry dropped his eyes, to stare at an especially fascinating bit of stone on the floor, rather than continue to meet his gaze. Harry didn’t know how to answer that. He shrugged again.

Snape pulled a potion out of one of the pockets of his robe, “I want you to swallow this before lunch today.” he held out a small vial, with a light blue liquid, “I’ll send up some more, this evening. A single vial before each meal.”

“What is it?” asked Harry suspiciously, he hesitantly put out his hand to take it.
“A slow acting poison to rid the world of people who annoy their teachers.” snapped Snape, darkly. He took a deep breath, seemingly to get a get his irritation under control, “It’s an appetite stimulant. I want you to take it every day before meals. If you don’t put on some weight, I will have no choice but to ban you from Quidditch.”

Harry’s eyes flew to meet Snape’s again, “You can’t!” he burst out, angrily, his hand still outstretched, “That’s not fair!” That was just like Snape, to find some reason to stop him playing.

It must have been Harry’s imagination, but he thought he saw a brief gleam of something like approval in the teacher’s face

Then those eyebrows rose again, “I think you’ll find I can.” Snape said quietly, in his silky voice, “I don’t believe I need you making yourself ill. Madame Pomfrey would have my head.”

“She’s never said anything about my weight before.” growled Harry, he crossed his arms over his chest, lifted himself to his full height, unconsciously mimicking Snape’s posture of a moment ago, “You can’t ban me from playing.”

“Appear at meals and actually eat something, and I won’t have to.” replied Snape, dryly. He was still holding out the potion.

“Oh.” Harry subsided, confused, “Yessir.” he mumbled. He took the proffered potion. Stuck it and his hands into his pockets, sullenly going back to examining the stone in the floor.

Snape sighed, “It is clear to me, that you don’t care for the company in the Hall. I intend to have my lunch in my office. Given that we have an unfinished conversation, I think you should join me.”

Oh, yes. That would improve Harry’s appetite, certainly. All he said, however, was, “Yessir.” To that same bit of stone.

“Noon, Potter.” Snape said, “Don’t be late.” his mouth turned up in a sardonic smile, and he swept away.

Jumping from the Astronomy Tower looked more inviting every minute, it really did.

Harry thought about that for a moment. It was a little disquieting, to realize it, but it did indeed have appeal.

Neville’s death had him considering death, in general. Harry wondered if he died, if he would be reunited with his parents. Since coming to Hogwarts, he had discovered that there were real ghosts. He wondered once or twice, in the back of his mind, why his parents hadn’t come to look after him as ghosts. Now, the question occupied an uncomfortably central place in his head.

Perhaps, they simply hadn’t wanted to.

If that was the case, perhaps wherever they went was better than here. Vernon and Petunia weren’t churchgoers, so Harry didn’t know much about the idea of Heaven, but he’d like to think his parents went somewhere like that.

For himself, he doubted anything like that existed. He wasn’t even sure he’d want it to.

Perhaps, if you didn’t stick around as a ghost, you just went nowhere. Like sleeping, but with no dreams. That really was appealing.

Sighing, Harry followed in Snape’s wake, turning to the stairway that led to the library.
“Harry!”

Damn.

Harry thought he’d slipped by them again, but Ron was hurrying to catch up with him, Hermione following more slowly.

Harry considered just running for it, but Ron had longer legs than him, now. It wasn’t as if Ron were Dudley, who’d just give up after a while. Ron could out-stubborn anyone he knew. He’d just lie in wait.

Harry decided he should just get it over with.

“What?” he said irritably, as they caught up with him. Ron stopped on the next step down from him and Hermione stood behind Ron.

Ron looked angry, “This is stupid.” he said, “You can’t keep avoiding us, like this.”

Harry shrugged, and changing his mind about having this conversation, tried to walk away, up the stairs. Ron grabbed the sleeve of Harry’s robe, “Harry!” He said again, loudly.

Harry turned around to look at him. Ron glanced around. Still standing one step down, so that their eyes were at the same level, he gently pushed Harry against the wall with a hand on his chest. He stood close enough that Harry would have to push him out of the way to get away.

Harry hated to be crowded like that and Ron knew it. But, before Harry could shove him away, Ron leaned in close to his ear. “Look,” Ron said in a whisper, his lips almost touching Harry’s ear, “Hermione told me. About...about Snape, being your guardian.”

“And it’s her fault.” Harry acidly whispered back, jerking his head at Hermione, but he didn’t move. At least the two of them understood that he wanted to keep things quiet.

“I was worried about you.” hissed Hermione. She’d come to stand on the same step he did, now. “I only told because I was tired of you coming back every term all beaten up.” her eyes held the same hurt they’d held yesterday in the common room, ‘I’m sorry, but after Neville, I just couldn’t...” she broke off, tears were running down her face.

Harry was overcome with remorse, thinking about shouting at her. This was the second time in twenty-four hours he’d made her cry, “Hermione, don’t” he said, hoarsely.

He closed his eyes, sagged against the wall and slid down to sit on the step, “I’m sorry.” he said softly. He wrapped his arms around himself, miserably and told himself he was not going to cry.

He felt Ron sit down next to him. Hermione sat on the next lower step, leaning against his shins. She put her hand on his that was sitting limply on his knee. He could hear her sniffle and he squeezed her hand.

Harry opened his eyes, when he was sure they weren’t going to start streaming, as well.

“Listen,” said Ron, in that almost inaudible whisper. If he wasn’t sitting so close, Harry wouldn’t have heard him, “I wrote Dad last night. I know for a fact that Mum and Dad’ll put in to have you. It’s just that the Ministry’s in an uproar, I bet. That’s why Snape got it transferred to him, on the quiet.” Ron said, confidently, “I bet Dumbledore worked it out. He’s got a lot of influence at the Ministry.”
Hermione put in, “Professor Snape probably only did it because he’s acting Headmaster. Professor McGonagal’s gone as well, there was just no one else to ask.”

Harry nodded again, that made sense. Maybe, there was a way out. And Snape had said it was temporary. McGonagal would be all right. The Weasleys would be brilliant. The fact that Ron had written to his parents to ask them about it, gave Harry a warm feeling in his chest. Even if nothing came of it, Ron was still his friend.

“So, it’ll be all right, yeah?” said Ron, bracingly, speaking in a normal volume.

Harry didn’t like to hope too much, “Can we...just not talk about it now?” he didn’t like the begging whine in his voice, but he couldn’t help it. If he could just not think about it for a few hours, he’d be grateful.

“Yeah, all right.” shrugged Ron, looking relieved, “Are we...okay now?”

Harry let his shoulders drop, “Yeah, okay.” he smiled. Hermione squeezed his hand, looking pleased.

“Have you eaten?” she asked.

“No. Not really.” he admitted, sheepishly.

“Well, come on, then.” said Ron, standing up, “I’m starving.” he took the stairs back down to the Great Hall two at a time.

Hermione and Harry followed. Hermione gave Harry’s hand a last squeeze before letting go.

Harry felt much more like eating now.
Lunch with Potter

Chapter Summary

Severus tries to finish the conversation they started yesterday.

My Dear Severus,

It appears that both the Ministry and the Board of Governors have concluded that I have no culpability in Neville Longbottom’s death.

I wish I could share their opinion.

Nevertheless, I will be returning tomorrow morning, to Hogwarts. Thank you, very much, for your excellent work in my absence. Most especially, your work with the students and healers.

I believe Minerva will be staying in London another week, at the least. She seems to be very helpful to Augusta.

I did have an intriguing conversation, this morning with Arthur Weasley. He had some news I found most interesting, involving some new experiment you are undertaking. I assume you will fill me in tomorrow.

Sincerely,

Albus

Severus wondered if he should see a dentist to have a mouth guard made. His head was hurting from the constant clenching of his jaw.

He and Dumbledore were well practiced in cryptic missives. Each of them were hesitant to say exactly what they meant in print. The experiment he referred to was, of course, Potter. Naturally, Potter had to tell his little friends about the new arrangement. And just as naturally they had seen fit to do what they could to rescue Potter from Severus’ evil clutches.

Fortunately, Arthur Weasley was an experienced parent, as well as a former member of the Order of the Phoenix, in its early days. Discretion was second nature to him. Hearing a wild story through his son, he’d have enough sense to go straight to Dumbledore.

Arthur Weasley would also understand the possibility that the Ministry would, essentially, sell the custody of The Boy Who Lived to the highest bidder. After all, the Longbottoms (Alice and Frank, before they were attacked and injured), the Malfoys, and who knows who else, had petitioned to adopt the child, all those years ago. It was only the Wizarding World’s unshakable faith in the bonds of blood that had satisfied the families attempting to get their hands on the boy.

Dumbledore would know to put the man off until he’d spoken to Severus, citing security or some such nonsense.

Picking up a quill, Severus penned a quick reply,
Albus,

Yes, I do have a new experiment underway. Far too complicated to explain here and I doubt Arthur has technical understanding to properly explain it.

In the meantime, I have also had to deal with some family business of an old friend, so I am very glad to hear you are returning. It has been an exhausting few days.

Let me know when you arrive, I will have much to tell you.

Severus

Given the headmaster’s current mood, he had no idea what the reaction to the Potter issue would be. To be fair, Minerva had commented to Dumbledore several times in the last two years that the boy wasn’t happy at the Dursley’s. Severus had always written it off as nothing more than a Muggle born’s preference for the Wizarding World. Especially when, in the Wizarding World, the boy was a celebrity. None of them had translated “unhappy” into “abused”.

Of course, none of them had translated Neville Longbottom’s unhappiness into anything dire, either.

He gave the envelope to the owl and it flew out of the door of the dungeon classroom with practiced ease, this being one of the school owls who generally brought messages here.

Severus firmly turned his mind from his ruminations. Potter would be here any minute and he had to endeavor to have a conversation with the boy, without causing him to have a panic attack.

Fortunately, the appetite stimulant Severus had given him was also mildly anti-anxiety and, more importantly, anti-emetic. They should be able to get through a meal without Potter’s lunch making a precipitate reappearance.

It appeared that whatever rift had occurred in the Golden Trio had been bridged, for now. At least, it had appeared so in the last potions class. Potter had been sitting with Granger and Weasley and had actually spoken to them. That withdrawal was still there, although less pronounced, now that he was on speaking terms with his friends again.

Severus wondered whom the boy was trying to fool, himself or everyone else. Potter’s behavior in potions today had been uncharacteristically studious. When he wasn’t working on the day’s potions assignment, he buried his head in his book, in a way more suited to Granger. When he thought no one was looking, the boy’s face took on a closed, preoccupied expression.

Truth be told, Severus was beginning to become alarmed by the boy.

Everyone was stressed at the moment, true, but Potter’s behavior was just so...off. Avoiding the Great Hall at meals and dodging his friends was not something Severus would have expected from the boy.

It had been quite the relief this morning, when the boy had become defiant over Quidditch.

Unwillingly, Severus had to consider Potter’s hidden heritage. Lily went off her food when she was upset, certainly, but she wasn’t prone to this sort of shut down. Truthfully, that was his own habit.

No, Severus dismissed that. Potter was suffering from grief and shock. And given Petunia’s miserable failure providing a home, it was understandable that the boy would withdraw.

Yet another thing that was wearing Severus’ teeth to stubs. Lily had adored Petunia when they were
children. They had fought after Lily had been accepted to Hogwarts and they had been distant for years, but Albus had assured everyone that Petunia was at least willing, if not thrilled, to have her sister’s boy. It had been so easy to trust that in Petunia’s grief for her sister, she would gladly take her nephew. She never sent the headmaster a single letter of complaint.

Of course, that might have had something to do with the two-thousand or so pounds a month Petunia received from Potter’s trust, Severus thought cynically. When he had received the note from Gringott’s, yesterday afternoon, he had understood that much, right away. The letter had named the sum of four hundred Galleons per month as support payment for the child.

He stood up from his desk, pacing the length of his office. He took a deep steadying breath, making a conscious effort to relax his jaw.

Potter was now two minutes late. He would give him until ten after, and then he would go find the boy, who would find himself mopping floors all week.

At five minutes after the hour, a soft knock at the door.

“You’re late, Potter.” growled Severus as he opened the door.

The boy flinched a little, then narrowed his eyes and visibly steeled himself, “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.” he gritted, hoarsely.

Severus moved aside and beckoned the boy in, “Well, come along then.” he said, impatiently, “Sit down.” he indicated the chair at the desk, “Do you still have potion I gave you?”

“Yes.” said Potter sullenly. He pulled the potion out of his pocket and sat down, putting it on the desk.

“It won’t do you any good, sat there.” remarked Severus dryly. He tapped his desk and the lunch he had instructed the house elves to make for himself and Potter appeared.

Potter shrugged.

“Just drink the damned thing, Potter.” snapped Severus, sitting down himself.

“Fine.” muttered the boy. He uncorked the vial and tipped it down his throat, “Oh, that’s not so bad.” he mumbled surprised, apparently to himself.

Severus suspected that, left to himself, the boy would never have taken the potion on his own. One of the reasons for this little meeting. Potter was more than underweight, according to the diagnostic charms Severus had done on Friday evening, he was positively malnourished.

The meal set before them was directed toward alleviating some of that. Severus could give the boy potions to help with the deficiencies, but nothing took the place of real food,

Severus noted that Potter was waiting for him to start, before he served himself. That was more manners than he really expected from the boy. Perhaps, Granger had been giving him etiquette lessons. Deftly, the teacher filled a plate from the various dishes on the table and set it in front of Potter.

“Thank you, sir.” The boy said, very quietly, glancing at Severus through the messy fringe of his hair.

Severus finished serving himself, and picked up his knife and fork. Potter followed suit.
The potion really took hold, then. Severus saw the boy’s shoulders drop, slowly relaxing. In a very short time, Potter became completely engrossed in his meal. Severus didn’t even bother to try to make conversation for a while. He wasn’t going to disturb the child, now that he was actually eating something.

Potter had nearly cleaned his plate, by the time his eating slowed down a little. He was actually the first to speak, “Why did you want to see me?” he asked with the air of one trying to get the worst over with.

“As I said, we had an unfinished conversation, yesterday.” replied Severus evenly, “So we’ll start there. Did you have any questions about this arrangement?”

The boy didn’t even look up from his plate, “No.” he made a sharp movement with his hand though, and his glass tipped.

Potter swore and caught the glass in mid fall, but the pumpkin juice inside went everywhere. Including Severus’ lap, the desk, and the sleeve of Potter’s robe.

Without missing a beat, the potions master had his wand out and cleaned himself up with a simple cleaning spell. He looked at Potter and was very glad that the potion had contained an anti-anxiety agent, otherwise the boy would be having another panic attack, judging by the look on his face.

“Sorry.” Potter whispered tensely, biting his lip. He put down the glass, very quietly on the desk and laid his hands on either side of his plate, as if he were trying to prevent them from trembling. He eyed Severus’ wand warily, as Severus cleaned up the surface of the desk.

When Severus pointed his wand at Potter to clean up the juice that had splashed the sleeve of the child’s school robes (since the boy had made no move to take out his own wand), Potter jerked back with a little gasp.

Severus raised his eyebrows at him.

Potter set his teeth and raised his chin, “Go on, then.” he hissed, defiantly, his green eyes flashing behind his glasses.

Severus huffed to himself and cleaned the child’s sleeve. Potter’s mouth dropped open and his cheeks turned red. Whatever he had been expecting, it had not been that, “Erm...Thank you.” he mumbled, awkwardly.

“What were you expecting me to do?” Severus asked him, irritably. He was trying not to snap at the child, but honestly, the boy was enough to make a saint swear.

The child shrugged, jerkily. Put his hands into his lap. Stared at them, “It’s just you usually go mad when I--when someone spills something.”

“Pumpkin juice does not explode, create poison gas, eat through the desk, catch on fire, or otherwise create a hazard.” Severus said harshly, “I have never had any severe injuries in my classroom and I wish to keep it that way.” The last potions master had had several major accidents. One of them during Severus’ N.E.W.T. seminar. That was not something Severus ever wanted to witness again. He certainly would not have it in any classroom he was supervising.

“Oh.” the boy still looked down at his hands, his face now red to the ears.

“While we’re on the subject, “ growled Severus, trying to address the child’s unwarranted fear, “You must realize that a teacher raising hand or wand to a student is against this school’s policies.”
“Yes, I know.” the boy nearly whispered. He raised his eyes to look at Severus, although he didn’t move his head. He did not seem at all reassured. Severus was getting damned tired of the child’s manner. This was not the Potter he was accustomed to.

“Well, moving on then.” sighed Severus, “I would appreciate if this arrangement were not mentioned to anyone. I have no wish to be in the newspapers.” The more quietly this could be taken care of, the happier they all would be.

“Yes, sir.” said Potter, to his hands.

“I understand you’ve already mentioned it to Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger.” Severus continued, “Please inform them that I prefer it go no further.”

That made Potter look up, properly, “How did you know?” his eyes were wide.

“I am not stupid.” replied Severus, coolly “Now, we should speak about practicalities.”

“Practicalities?” Potter asked, his eyes were narrowed again “What does that mean?”

“Your school robes need replacing, at the very least.” said Severus firmly. The ones the boy was wearing were at least an inch shorter in the sleeves than they should have been and rather threadbare. They brought uncomfortable memories of wearing second hand robes to Severus’ mind, “And I imagine other things could do with it, as well.”

The boy glared at him, “I didn’t have a chance to do any shopping.” he said, flatly.

“Your Aunt didn’t take you?” asked Severus. He shouldn’t be surprised, he thought, “Why not?”

Potter’s lips curled in contempt. He crossed his arms across his chest and looked away. “I always do it myself.”

“I see,” Severus replied in a low voice, his ire at Petunia beginning to rise again. “And when was the last time those glasses were replaced?”

“Replaced?” Potter said blankly, looking back at Severus, “I got them when I was eight. The school nurse complained to Aunt Petunia that I couldn’t see.”

Severus was very glad he hadn’t had this conversation before he’d seen Petunia, “I’ll make an appointment with the oculist in Hogsmeade.” he said.

“Sorry?” again that blank look, “But there’s no problem with my glasses. I see just fine.”

“Those glasses are composed of little more than masking tape and spells.” Severus said, venomously, “It’s completely disgraceful.” That the child had been denied something as basic as decent eyeglasses by those people made Severus’ stomach knot in anger.

The boy seemed to hug himself more tightly and looked away again.

“I believe everything you need can be obtained in Hogsmeade.” Severus said, “I’ll make your appointment for Saturday morning and we can accomplish it all, then.”

“I...uh...haven’t had a chance to visit my vault.” muttered Potter.

It took a second for Severus to understand what Potter meant, “That won’t be necessary.” Severus said.
“But,” Potter, “I can pay for it. My parents...”

“Arranged for your support before they died.” Severus said, firmly. Not wanting to take charity was an impulse Severus could understand, very well, “There’s no need to go into the central vault. Gringott’s sends support funds along monthly.”

“Are they sending it to you because you’re a Wizard?” asked Potter, he seemed to be struggling with something, “Is that why Aunt Petunia never got any money for looking after me? Because Gringott’s couldn’t send it to a Muggle?”

Severus’ was unsure how to answer that. He settled on part of the truth, “She did, in fact, receive funds for your care. Gringott’s has no difficulty dealing in pounds.” he said carefully.

“No.” Potter started to shake his head, “No, she always told me...” he stopped suddenly, compressing his lips and looking upset.

“I think it’s safe to say that many things your Aunt told you are untrue.” said Severus. He thought it was unwise just now to tell Potter just how much the support fund provided monthly. It was quickly becoming apparent to Severus that the scruffiness that had always irritated him about the boy, ascribing it as he did to the vagaries of teenage fashion, had much more to do with his guardian’s neglect.

Potter’s mouth twisted and he shrugged, again.

Severus glanced at his clock, almost sighing in relief when he saw that it was almost time for the next class.

He reached into his desk drawer and picked out another vial of potion, handing it to the boy, “Take this at dinner time and I’ll have some sent up to your dormitory for the next week.” he told him.

Potter nodded, stowing the vials in a pocket.

“I’ll let you know when we’re going to the oculist.” Severus stood, as did the boy.

Potter’s expression had become closed again, the way it had been in class this morning. Normally, Potter was very easy to read, so Severus found this change, disquieting.

“Yes. Thank you, sir.” the boy said politely, as if he were talking to a complete stranger. His voice was flat. A moment ago, he had appeared ready to rage or weep. Now, nothing.

Severus watched the boy walk off down the hall, not sure if this shutting down was a symptom of fear or grief, or something altogether more ominous.
Fear

Chapter Summary

Harry reflects on Snape's words.

For the rest of the day, Harry went through the motions of behaving normally. He knew Hermione was watching him, all through their next class.

It was tempting to get angry at his friends again, but he just couldn’t. They’d truly been trying to help. Like his teacher or his school nurse who’d tried to help before, they just didn’t realize the consequences of their actions.

It didn’t matter much why this was happening, or whose fault it might be, he thought. Nothing seemed to matter much after Harry had stumbled from Snape’s office in a horrified daze. This was his life and his life just could never be easy.

Luckily, the class that afternoon was History of Magic. The late Professor Binns taught it the same way he’d taught it for about a hundred years. Lecturing from the book so that, assuming one could read, one didn’t miss much by not listening. Many a student caught up on sleep in the ghostly professor’s classroom.

Today he used the time to replay the conversation he’d just had with Professor Snape. If not for the potion that seemed to be settling Harry’s stomach, he thought he’d likely be throwing up again.

“You must realize that a teacher raising hand or wand to a student is against this school’s policies.” Snape had said, in that low, dangerous tone that never failed to make Harry shiver with dread.

Oh yes, Harry realized it. Harry realized it with a clarity born of painful experience. He completely understood Snape’s meaning, the implicit threat reverberating through his mind.

A teacher could never raise hand nor wand to a student; a guardian was exempt from such restrictions.

Vernon had made similar statements, reminding him that, while other people might have constraints on their behavior towards Harry, as his guardian, Vernon had free rein.

When Harry thought about Snape having this kind of authority over him (and it wasn’t as if he could avoid thinking about it for long), he felt as thoroughly trapped as he ever had been when he was locked in his cupboard.

Before, the only thing Harry had feared from Snape was a detention or loss of house points. The man’s preferred punishment tended to be things like cleaning cauldrons or mopping floors. Unpleasant and repetitive, but not actively painful. Occasionally, it was lines. He could be scary when he shouted and had threatened Harry and Ron with expulsion last year when they’d arrived at school with Ron’s dad’s car, but he’d had no power to enforce it.

What could he do to Harry now? It wasn’t even a question of Harry making sure not to break any rules, Like Uncle Vernon, Snape wouldn’t wait until he had actually done something.
Snape was unlikely to do anything that would leave a mark or be lastingly painful, but Harry was sure that he was much more creative than Uncle Vernon. Banning him from Quidditch (which in Harry’s mind would be worse than a caning) would just be a warm up. Who knew what kind of punishment he could mete out with a wand?

The threat having been made clear, Snape had taken Harry to task for every single inadequacy, right down to his oft-repaired glasses.

Harry’s skin felt hot all over, as he recalled the professor’s words on the state of Harry’s wardrobe. It wasn’t Harry’s fault that he’d not been able to get new robes this year. Snape had scoffed when Harry tried to tell him that Petunia wouldn’t take him shopping. Snape didn’t know it, but Harry was lucky he’d had enough gold left in his trunk to buy new text books by owl order.

The comment about his glasses being a disgrace was downright evil, in Harry’s opinion. He’d done some very good spell work on them, he thought resentfully. Perhaps, he expected Harry to be proficient enough to cast a repairing spell that lasted. Snape always had a way of making Harry feel as though his magic just didn’t measure up.

After some more thought, Harry wondered if the man was correct. Given the amount of times he’d cast that spell, he really should be better at it by now.

The revelation that Petunia and Vernon had been receiving support for him was stunning. He’d heard for twelve years how he was taking food out of Dudley’s mouth. If ever they had to tell Dudley they couldn’t afford something, they’d explain that it was because the Freak was there and it was expensive to keep Freaks.

Harry knew Snape hadn’t believed him about that either. His voice had gotten dangerous again, as he’d said “I’m sure there are many things ‘Your Aunt Told You’ that are untrue.” Snape wasn’t much on hearing excuses.

At least whatever potion that the professor had given him had worked. Even though Harry sat down with the man with absolutely no interest in food, soon after taking it, everything became very appealing. Once he’d started eating, the hot food seemed to settle his nerves, making the meal, if not the conversation, much less of an ordeal than it could have been.

He had considered just not taking it at dinner, but reasoned that there was no need to cut off his nose to spite his face. The potion had done what it was supposed to do at lunchtime. Plus Harry had no interest in inviting Snape to ban him from Quidditch. He knew the man was looking for the slightest excuse to do so.

By dinner time, Harry could stop worrying about Hermione being concerned about him. She and Ron were having some disagreement about Hermione’s new cat. Sometime after class, it had been chasing Ron’s rat and now neither animal was to be found. They were so busy sniping at each other, that they didn’t notice Harry’s quiet withdrawal. Harry just listened to them listlessly.

Harry caught Snape watching him at dinner, though. He returned the man’s gaze as coolly as he could and made sure that Snape saw him take his potion. Again, after the first few bites that tasted like cardboard, the food seemed to suddenly become delicious. In fact, Harry found himself taking seconds of both his dinner and dessert. That was unusual for him. It must have reassured Hermione, because she gave him a bright relieved smile, which he returned as well as he could.

After dinner, Harry headed out to the lake, by himself to look for Snuffles. The grounds were empty, as the weather had turned cold again. Most of the students were already in their common rooms.
As Harry wandered closer to the boundary of the Forest, he felt a cold chill that went deeper than his skin. He thought he saw a movement of a dark figure among the trees. It had to be one of those dreadful dementors doing a patrol.

His hair standing up, he left the sausages where he’d first seen the dog and hoped he’d be back tomorrow. Feeling he had no choice, he retreated back up to his common room.

Hermione was off at the library, but Ron was there, starting on his homework, “She’s just mad because I won’t let her cat eat Scabbers.” Ron said scathingly, “I found him hiding in my trunk, with that evil thing scrabbling to get in.”

Harry shook his head at Ron, noncommittally. He was not going to get in the middle of this one. He tried to be sympathetic, but really, it just didn’t seem fair that the worst thing that Ron had to worry about was his rat being eaten.

Mechanically, Harry sat down to do his homework, reading through his assignments more attentively than normal, trying to stop thinking about Snape and Neville and the Dursleys and this whole horrible month.

He wondered what would happen when Dumbledore came back. It likely didn’t matter. It’s not as though Dumbledore had ever been particularly sympathetic to Harry’s problems with the Dursleys. Now, with Snape, it was likely he’d be less so.

Harry refused to think about the possibility that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would adopt him. That would hurt too much if he hoped for it and it didn’t happen. It was quite likely they wouldn’t be able to afford another mouth to feed, anyway.

That night he found himself in the common room, unable to face his bed. Even if he were able to drop off, he knew for a fact, that the nightmares would be waking him up soon. He’d gotten hardly any sleep since this whole thing started.

He’d found that sometimes he did better sleeping on a settee in the common room, with the lamps burning all night and the sound of the fire to keep him company.
Chapter Summary

We discover how and why Severus and Lily conceived Harry.

Not graphic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a disorienting experience, Severus thought, to view one's own magically enhanced memories through a Pensieve. It was a bit like Muggle films, only one was within the film. The scene could be sped up, slowed down, run backward. To watch oneself from the outside was peculiar.

He thought he'd like to discuss the theory with Filius, he really had no idea how the things worked.

Dumbledore had asked Severus for a copy of this memory. He had agreed, on the condition that he was able to view it himself first, to make edits. Although he had agreed to provide a complete enough memory to back his tale, the headmaster had understood the desire to ensure nothing embarrassing was contained therein.

The memory lightened slowly, like the set of a stage. A song that Severus had not listened to for years drifted to his ears.

"Out on the wily, windy moors
We'd roll and fall in green
You had a temper, like my jealousy
Too hot, too greedy
How could you leave me?
When I needed to possess you?
I hated you, I loved you too."

A soprano voice sang ethereally from the speakers of the cabinet stereo, filling up the room. The old stereo was easily the most expensive thing Tobias had ever bought for Eileen, although it was by no means a high end one. It was the only thing of Tobias' that Severus had not yet transfigured, sold or thrown out. He had also found that some magical tinkering made the sound better.

Severus' record collection had not been extensive, but he remembered the occasion of buying this one. The woman's voice had tugged on his heartstrings like nothing else had in a long time. It had a harsh, tight sound to it. Sounding both girlish and ancient, as though the singer's voice was raw from anger or tears.

He'd heard it playing inside the record shop and had felt compelled to find the name of the song and the artist. Finally, he gave in to the rare impulse and bought the LP. The more he'd listened, the more this song drew him in.

Severus' younger self sat in the living room of his father's house on Spinner's End. Rather than wizard's robes, he was dressed in black Muggle jeans and t-shirt. He'd been out in Muggle London
that day. His leather jacket hung carelessly from the back of the chair and his boots were thrown into
the corner.

The house bore little resemblance to the house Severus had grown up in. Severus' copious book
purchases had begun to fill the bookshelves he'd transfigured from pieces of lumber. Quite the step
up from the cinder block and plank shelving he'd used in his room when he was in school. His father
hadn't allowed him to use magic to make any shelves when the bastard was still alive.

"Bad dreams in the night
They told me I was going to lose the fight
Leave behind my Wuthering, Wuthering
Wuthering Heights"

Severus watched himself pour a glass of white wine, his face quiet. He needed no Pensieve to
remember how he'd felt that night. The melancholy music suited to his mood and a perfect
counterpoint to the wind outside.

"Heathcliff, its me, Cathy come home
I'm so cold, let me in your window, oh!"

Tobias had been dead for six weeks and the young Wizard had never felt so free in his life. The old
man had had no other family and certainly no friends, other than the drunks down the pub. Severus
hadn't bothered with a funeral; it would have been a great waste of money. Rather, he had given his
father the bare minimum required by duty. No burial and grave stone for Tobias Snape. Just a
perfunctory cremation and illicit dumping into the river where he'd taken Severus to fish, when he
was tiny.

"Oh it gets dark, it gets lonely
On the other side from you
I pine a lot, I find a lot
Falls through without you
I'm coming back love, cruel Heathcliff
My one dream, my only master"

A sharp thumping at his door startled him (both his real self and his recorded, younger self) so much
he nearly dropped his glass.

That night, he'd been expecting no one. He'd drawn his wand and opened the door by a crack. He
knew that the caller must be a wizard or witch, he'd put a charm on the house to hide it from Muggle
eyes only the prior week.

"Too long I roam in the night
I'm coming back to his side to put it right
I'm coming home to Wuthering, Wuthering,
Wuthering Heights"

Severus crept to stand where his memory self stood. He looked out at the hooded, cloaked figure on
the doorstep.

"Heathcliff, It's me, Cathy. I'm so cold. So co-o-old"

A woman stood there, by the shape of it. She looked over her shoulder as if fearing pursuit from the
street.
"Let me have it, let me grab your soul away"

"What do you want?" demanded memory-Severus.

The woman's head turned. Both Severuses bit back a gasp. The younger from surprise, the elder from unexpected pain.

Light from inside the house fell on red hair. Her green eyes were red rimmed and her cheeks blotchy. Her grey cloak covered robes the green of a healer's uniform, as if she'd come straight from work. She held her wand in both hands, nervously rolling it between her fingers.

"Severus?" the woman's voice was rough and shaky, "I-I'm sorry...I didn't know where else to go."

"Lily." breathed the memory Severus.

The real Severus crossed his arms across his chest. Already, tears had slowly started down his cheeks. He breathed deeply, mastering himself, glad again that he'd decided to view this alone first. He stepped back to lean against the wall of the memory house, willing himself to be a dispassionate observer.

"Lily." repeated Severus the younger, blankly, "What are you doing here?"

The woman tried to answer, but her voice was choked with tears. She covered her mouth with one hand, as though to prevent sobs from escaping.

"Look, you better come in. It's not safe." The elder Severus winced at his younger self's still-prominent working class accent, the T's pronounced as glottal stops. The "I" and the "T" in "it's" lost somewhere, so that he was saying "S'nah' safe".

Severus-of-the-present was reminded why he'd gotten into the habit of always speaking so formally. The precision of the words helped him to shed the lazy pronunciation.

The memory Severus gently put out his hand, encircling her shoulders, "Come on, Lily." he said.

She pressed her sleeve to her cheek and wiped the tears there. Severus produced a handkerchief which she took gratefully, stepping into the room.

"I'm sorry." Lily said again, taking deep breaths as Severus turned back to the street to cast a quick Revelio outside. No Wizards appeared within range of the spell, so he shut the door.

Lily stood looking around the front room at the bookshelves and the one good chair Severus had transfigured for himself to read in. She looked small and lost and achingly sad.

"What happened?" The younger Severus finally organized himself to ask (it came out as "Wha' appened" and real-Severus winced again), after a moment of gawping at the distressed witch.

"It's James...he...he..." she pressed her hand to her mouth again as her words were lost in sobs.

Severus had never understood how frightening he was in anger, before now. He watched memory-Severus' face darken into an expression far too reminiscent of Tobias Snape in a rage, as he snarled, "What did he do?"

The young wizard's hand was tight on his wand as he crossed to Lily. He put his hands on her shoulders.

Lily reached up to put her hands on Severus' arms, shaking her head "No...no, Sev. It's not like that.
He didn't do anything." Her face was awash in tears as she spoke, "Don't...

"Did he hurt you? I'll fucking kill him. What did he do, Lily? Did he hit you?" He searched what skin he could see for marks.

"He didn't do anything, Sev." she said firmly, although her voice was harsh with tears, "He didn't!"

"Are you sure?" Severus looked into Lily's eyes, searching for the truth of her words.

"Sev," Lily said waringly,"Severus! Stop." she tore her eyes away from his, and stepped back, out of his grip, "Get out of my head."

The music filled the space between them as she glared. She grasped her own wand firmly now, holding it slightly raised at her hip. She shifted on her feet, biting her lip, "This was a mistake." she said very quietly, taking a step towards the door.

Severus took another step back, "Sorry." he said quietly, he reached out with his left hand to forestall her "But I had to know." his voice trembled a little, "You know that..." he hesitated as though searching for the word, "People...they lie about things like that."

Lily's anger drained away. She looked around the front room again, "Yes. I know." her shoulders dropped, "Of course, I know." her voice was pained.

Severus ran his raised hand through his hair, sighing, "Look. Come sit down. I won't do that again." He transfigured the chair into a small settee. He threw himself onto it and held out his hand in invitation, "So are you going to tell me why you came here? After all this time?" Severus asked softly.

She sat down beside him, but didn't take his hand. Instead she put her wand across her lap and folded her hands over it. For a long time she stared at him, as though she wanted to read his mind, although she'd never been good at Legilimency. Severus returned her regard and waited for her to collect herself.

"You sent a wedding present." Lily said, when she finally spoke, seemingly apropos of nothing.

"It's customary," he replied stiffly.

"You didn't have to," she dropped her gaze to look at her hands. The watching Severus-of-the-now was startled by the posture. She looked uncannily like her son. Strange that he'd never noticed before, but the child moved like Lily.

"Did you mean what you said? In your note?" Lily asked cautiously of the memory-Severus, not looking at him.

"That I still missed you and I hoped you were happy?" he asked.

Lily nodded. She didn't look up.

"Of course I did," Severus leaned forward to take her folded hands in both of his, "Are you going to tell me why you're here?"

Lily sighed, "I have been happy with James, you know. Even with the War-and everything. We've been trying for a baby." she would not look at him.

Severus leaned forward to put his forehead against the top of her head. She leaned into him with a
"We've been trying for a baby since we got married." Lily repeated in a whisper, "It's been more than a year." The room seemed overwhelmingly quiet, neither Severus had noticed when the record ended. The needle was charmed to lift itself at the end of the record.

"I started worrying. It's a long time to try...especially since I've been keeping track of the best times to...you know." she went on. She spoke conspiratorially, as though afraid someone would overhear. The real Severus had to lean in close to hear her, "I want to specialize in midwifing, I've been apprenticed with a midwife. She ran all the charms on me last month." Tears started to fall again, but her voice was almost steady, "She taught me the charms to run on James. I did it this afternoon. He'd worked all night so he was asleep. He didn't know."

Now Lily raised her head to look at Severus. Her eyes were desolate, "He can't...can't father children. He's a Pure Blood and he must have..."

Severus blew his breath out sharply, understanding. This was the reason many Pure Blood Wizarding families became extinct. "Oh, Lily." he held her hands firmly, "Have you told him?"

"I can't bear to. He wants a child so badly. And so do I." her eyes dropped back to her lap, "I couldn't think of who else to go to."

"I don't understand. I don't know what I can do..." Severus trailed off as Lily lifted her eyes, now bright and sharp.

"Do you know how to make the potion?" She asked.

"Potion?" Severus asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise and confusion, "I can make any potion you want, but there's no cure for this. You know that."

"Occludus Paternus." Lily said firmly, those bright eyes never leaving Severus' face.

"I...I suppose...I mean," Severus paused, swallowed, "It's not a difficult potion...But..." he paused again,

"But, what?" Lily demanded softly.

"Well, who would be the...you know..?" Severus cheeks reddened as he spoke.

"The donor?" asked Lily, her eyes still sharp, although her own cheeks had turned bright pink too.

Severus nodded, "I suppose you'll ask one of Potter's friends?" his voice was harsh with what sounded like disapproval.

Lily's skin darkened to a red that was painful to look at, "I-I sort of hoped..." her voice cracked. She drew back her hands, took up her wand. Made to rise off the settee, "Never mind. I said this was a mistake."

"Lily...Lily, wait." Severus recaptured her hands and stopped her from getting up, "I'm sorry. I just...Sorry. Stupid question. None of my business. Of course I'll do it."

Lily looked at him, her face lighting up with a joyful smile, despite her tears. She threw herself into his arms, sobbing again.

He stiffened, awkwardly patting the back of the distraught woman. He put his other hand on the
back of her head, stroking her hair, "Sh-sh Lily," he said, "It's okay."

She drew back, "Thank you."

"When are you going to tell Potter?" Severus asked when Lily seemed to calm down enough to speak again.

She sat back, her eyes haunted, "I'm not."

"You what?" said Severus, astonished, "You can't keep that from him. Whoever you asked...they'd be bound to say something."

"What if I asked you?" Lily said.

He opened and shut his mouth a few times, looking gobsmacked, "But Lily, he'd never let you."

"He won't know anything about it." Lily crossed her arms, "If you won't do it, I'll go to a Muggle sperm bank."

"A what? What is that?"

Lily made an irritated noise, " Didn't you hear about it last year? The baby they conceived in a test tube? It was all over the news." she glared at him accusingly, "Of course you don't read Muggle papers."

"What?" He shook his head and put his hands over his eyes for a second, "So, what, they just use some man's..." he broke off, taking his hands away from his face. He wasn't sure what term to use.

"Sperm." said Lily, flatly, "I understand they preserve it by freezing. They would artificially inseminate me. It's very expensive, but I still have the insurance money from my parents."

"But, that sounds horrible." Severus gaped at her. Another horrible thought occurred to him, "What if the child was a Squib?"

"I'm Muggle born. Do you think I would care?" Lily flared. She stood up to pace. She walked right by the real Severus, looking angry and determined.

"Potter would care. You know he would." Severus said, quietly. He sat forward on the settee with his elbows on his knees, watching her move back and forth like a man at a tennis match.

"He wants a child as much as I do. He wouldn't care." she assured him.

"Lily." Severus stood, "Lily...I...I'm not sure I could." he told her. He crossed his left arm across his chest, holding the elbow of his dangling wand hand, that still held his wand, "You're my best friend..."

Lily stopped pacing, to look at him with a little smile on her lips, "Still?"

He sighed, with a small, sad, fond smile of his own, "Still."

The real Severus suppressed a sob.

"But," went on memory Severus, relentlessly it seemed, "I never thought of you like that. It's not that you're not pretty," he went on quickly, afraid he'd be misinterpreted, "But you're not...you know?"

"We could get drunk?" Lily said shyly, hopefully, "I don't want it to be someone who's not a friend."
And I know you'd never tell."

He looked at her for a long time, not saying anything. She appeared to be holding her breath.

Abruptly, he turned to his bookshelves. Severus knew which book the potion was in. He knew all those potion books intimately, although he'd never made this particular potion before. He looked in the index and then flipped to the proper page, "The potion would take a week to make. You need to take it two weeks after conception, right when you miss your first period, for the first three months."

Lily nodded, "Thank you." she breathed, understanding he was giving his consent to her mad scheme.

"When would you want to..?" Severus gave her a sidelong look, without raising his head from the book.

Her face was beet red again, "Madam Bonenfant gave me a fertility potion this afternoon. And James thinks I'm at a birth tonight. Madam Bonenfant will back me up."

"Bonenfant? She's your preceptor?" He asked, lifting his head to look at her properly.

Lily nodded, "She knows what I'm doing. She told me not to tell her with whom." she shrugged, looking to the side, "It's a common enough problem that many of the midwives know women who've had to do this."

"Oh." Severus said, quietly.

"So, if you haven't got any other plans, we could do it, tonight." Lily hugged herself, now, "If you've got anymore of that wine." she indicated the sideboard where his forgotten wineglass stood.

The young man smiled gently, "You always get sick. I've got something better. I've got a potion that will make us really fancy each other, for about half an hour."

Lily giggled, embarrassed, "Perhaps, it could be forty five minutes?"

"Enough" The real Severus halted the memory. He wiped his face with his sleeve (although he loathed it when students did that) and used the incantation to cut the memory there. He only needed the memory to show that nothing coerced or non-consensual had happened. He didn't need to give the old bastard a show.

Chapter End Notes

The song is "Wuthering Heights" by Kate Bush, on the album "The Kick Inside". It was on the British Charts in 1979. Just Like I am not JKR, I am not Kate Bush.
Saturday morning, at breakfast, one of the school owls surprised Harry by landing in front of him with an envelope addressed to him. Harry took it from the bird, which helped itself to a piece of his toast before flying off.

On the outside of the envelope, Harry recognized Professor Snape's cramped handwriting. He chanced a glance at the man who was seemingly engrossed in conversation with Hagrid.

Harry looked down and opened the letter.

Mr. Potter,

I was able to make an appointment for you this morning at half-past eleven with the oculist in Hogsmeade.

Meet me in my office at eleven o'clock, ready to leave.

Professor Snape

Harry sighed unhappily. He really didn't want to go anywhere with the man, today or ever. All week, during class, Snape had mostly ignored Harry, which was fine with him. Harry had entertained the hope that Snape would be like other adults and just forget about his glasses and his clothes. He wanted this whole thing to just go away.

It seemed that Snape had been affected in some small way by Neville's death. The man was less harsh and sarcastic in class. Hermione pointed out that the class had also changed a bit; the students were more subdued than usual. Even Malfoy was keeping his mouth shut. She had wondered aloud if Snape was less difficult because of what had happened to Neville.

Despite potions being less awful than usual, it had been a very long week. Dumbledore was filling in for McGonagall's transfiguration class. For the first time since coming to Hogwarts, Harry found himself dodging the headmaster too. Harry sat in the second to last row, in the chair by the wall, to avoid speaking to the man. Harry thought he felt Dumbledore's eyes on him whenever they were in the same room. Only the threat of being banned from Quidditch kept Harry from skipping meals in the Great Hall.

Lupin's class was turning out to be more difficult than Snape's in some ways. Lupin was a very good teacher, but he seemed to want to be friendly with Harry. He'd been very solicitous about Harry
missing class at the beginning of the week and had told Harry, quietly, "As acting head of house, I am always available should you need me."

Oh, yes, that was bloody likely. After all this fuss, the last thing Harry wanted to do was confide in an adult—about anything. At the moment, he wasn't even sure about confiding in his friends. The only safe listener Harry felt he had was Snuffles. To Harry's great pleasure and relief, the dog had turned back up on Thursday afternoon. He still looked scruffy and skinny and Harry thought with some amusement that they were a good match.

As Harry stared off into space, Hermione slid in next to him at the breakfast table.

"Harry, what is it?" she asked worriedly. "You look upset." She was looking at him with a worried, quizzical expression—the one she'd been wearing a lot this week.

Harry started, coming out of his thoughts abruptly. "Oh, it's nothing. I've got an appointment with the oculist in Hogsmeade this morning."

Hermione beamed. "Well, that's good. Has it been more than a year since you had your eyes checked?"

Harry blinked at her. "A little longer than that, yeah," he admitted. How often were you supposed to have your eyes checked? Harry had just assumed that once you got glasses, you were all set. Aunt Petunia always seemed to imply that Harry was supposed to make his pair last until he turned eighteen.

"Oh, then you're probably overdue," Hermione said, nodding. She leaned over to whisper: "Is Professor Snape taking you?"

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The urge to snap at Hermione was still very strong, but he couldn't afford to drive his friends away.

"Has he said anything else to you? Since the other day?" she asked, still very quietly.

"No," Harry whispered back. "I have to meet him at eleven." Harry stood abruptly. "I want to go out to the pitch before then," he said in a normal tone. "See you later."

Hermione gave him a little smile and patted his arm. "I'll see you when you get back, shall I? You're so lucky you get to go see Hogsmeade first. I can't wait until the first Hogsmeade weekend."

Harry had almost forgotten about that. Third years were allowed to visit Hogsmeade if their parents or guardians signed the permission form. There was no way Vernon would have signed it. Harry glanced at Snape, where he still sat at the teacher's table. It didn't seem likely that Snape would sign it, if only because it would make Harry happy.

Snape saw him look this time. The professor raised his eyebrows questioningly. Harry held the letter up slightly and nodded sharply. The man inclined his head, but his expression didn't change. Then he turned back to the conversation he was having, apparently dismissing Harry from his thoughts.

Harry caught Dumbledore looking at him again. The man looked as though he hadn't recovered from his ordeal at the Ministry. He still looked wise and benignly powerful, but the twinkle was subdued. He probably had a great deal on his mind, Harry thought. Most of it had to be something other than Harry's predicament.

"See you in a bit," Harry told Hermione as he left. She smiled and picked up her copy of the Daily Prophet.
Instead of going up to Gryffindor Tower, Harry wandered the corridors aimlessly. It suddenly seemed like too much trouble to go and retrieve his broom, and he didn't want to run into anyone who might want to talk. After a while, he found himself on the staircase of the astronomy tower.

The grounds were still foggy. It was an amazing view, on a clear day. Today he saw mostly mist. September had been rainy and damp the last two years. It seemed extra chilly this year, though. Harry hadn't brought his cloak, but again it seemed like too much trouble to go find it.

Harry put his forearms on top of the chin-high wall around the roof. After a minute he decided to scramble up onto it. On the rough wall, it was easy to find footholds. He stood there, enjoying the feel of the breeze through his hair. It was almost as good as being on his broom, he decided.

He sat down on the wall with his legs kicking out into empty space. Idly, he wondered how far a fall would have to be to kill a wizard. Neville's uncle had dropped Neville out of a window and he'd bounced. Would it have to be ten stories? Twenty? If your organs were crushed, did your magic have any hope of saving you? What would that feel like? It had to be an easier end than what Neville had gone through.

Harry found himself wondering what his parents had felt when they died. According to the headmaster, Voldemort used the killing curse on them. That was supposed to be instantaneous. Harry wondered if it hurt.

A little noise behind him told him that there was someone else there. He looked around. Ginny was just coming out of the trap door onto the roof, "Hey, Ginny."

She started, evidently she hadn't realized he was there, "Oh. Hi, Harry," Ginny said, her face going rather red. "Sorry. I didn't know anyone was up here. I'll go find somewhere else...I mean..." She spoke rather quickly before breaking off, embarrassed, "I was just looking for a quiet place to study."

Harry sighed and looked at his watch. "I have to go anyway. Snape's taking me into Hogsmeade to go to the oculist and he'll have a fit if I'm late." And Harry supposed he should look reasonably tidy.

"Oh. Okay, then," said Ginny, apparently relieved. Harry hopped down off the wall and headed back down the stairs. He noticed that Ginny had no books, but he was too preoccupied to wonder what she was up to.

At one minute before eleven, Harry was at Snape's door, his hair still damp from the shower. He'd put on his least-worn robe and then his cloak over that.

There wasn't a whole lot he could do about his shoes. Last year's school shoes were hopelessly small (his feet being the one thing that grew apparently) so he wore a pair of Dudley's old trainers. They were black at least, and Harry hoped Snape wouldn't be too irritated.

Snape opened the door before Harry could even knock, startling Harry who involuntarily jumped back a bit.

"Potter," said the professor in greeting. The man's black eyes swept up and down Harry. His eyes narrowed, but all he said, in a measured, neutral tone, was: "Thank you for being on time."

Harry couldn't tell if the man was mocking him or not. He nodded, not sure what the proper reply should be.

"You have your wand?" asked Snape, as he stowed his own wand in his black robe.

"Yes," replied Harry, wondering why Snape asked. Snape's eyebrow raised. Harry hastily added,
"Sir."

Snape nodded curtly and strode off down the hall so that Harry had to trot to keep up. "Come along then, Potter."

They were both silent as they walked through the castle. Few people were about fortunately, and no students crossed their paths.

Harry kept a close eye on Snape, not wanting to do anything to piss the man off. Truthfully, he was more than a little nervous about this appointment. He wondered if it would be any different from the Muggle eye doctor he'd seen when he was eight.

"I see you are in need of shoes as well," Snape said, glancing at Harry. "Shall I simply assume we need to replace your entire wardrobe?" His voice was dry and neutral. "And I don't believe I have ever seen you wear something as practical as boots."

Harry shrugged. He'd never gotten anything that wasn't on the list. And it wasn't as though Snape had any call to comment on someone else's appearance.

Although, it did seem that Snape was concerned about his appearance today, as he had put in something of an effort. Snape's robes were of a slightly higher quality than the robes he normally wore for teaching.

Harry also noted, with a strictly internal smirk, that Snape's hair looked a little less greasy than usual. It generally did in the morning, come to think of it. Perhaps it was the potions fumes the man worked with constantly that gave him that perpetually oily look. Certainly, after class, Harry had often noted that potion fumes had an interesting effect on the students' hair, often making it both frizzy and wet looking.

"We will have to pass the Dementors," Professor Snape said as they walked to the gates. "Stay close to me. Professor Lupin mentioned that they had a particularly unpleasant effect on you."

Harry ground his teeth a little, irritated that his teachers were apparently talking about him.

"Here." Snape shoved a large bar of chocolate into Harry's hand. "Eat that," he said curtly.

Harry looked at the chocolate blankly for a moment, wondering what on earth that was about. He irritably tucked the chocolate bar into his pocket, as Snape got a little ahead of him.

As they reached the castle gates, the drizzly day became even chillier. Harry thought he sensed tall, black cloaked figures, hovering just out of sight, in the mist.

Hunching his shoulders against the mist that was stealing his warmth, crawling damply under his cloak, Harry's thought were bleak. With every step towards the gates, Harry found himself thinking more and more about the view from the tower. He wondered again how it would feel to die. If he fell from such a height, he wondered if he'd stay conscious all the way down, or if he'd pass out before then.

Perhaps it would have been better if he had died with his parents. His mother had thrown herself in front of the killing curse, but what had been the point, really? It left Harry alone with only the Dursley's to reluctantly take him. Now he was stuck with Snape.

The cold mist wrapped more closely around him. It curled around him, dulling sounds, obscuring his sight, hiding the dark figure of Professor Snape, cutting him off from everyone else in the world.
What was the point of his survival when there was no one who wanted him? Voldemort was gone and, while everyone wanted The Boy Who Lived, everyone who might have wanted Harry was dead.

Horrible, hysterical screams cut through the mist around Harry's brain. Harry looked around wildly, but the fog might as well have been a solid wall.

A woman was screaming, somewhere very close to him, as the white mist darkened to grey, then to clammy blackness. Distantly, Harry thought he heard Professor Snape call his name, but it was difficult to hear over the screaming. Someone was screaming for help. Harry wanted to help her, but the blackness was overwhelming him, drowning him. And still the woman screamed, "Not Harry! Not Harry!" she was screaming.

"Stand aside, girl. Stand aside!" cried a high, cold voice. A flash of green light lit up the darkness for an instant, and then the dark claimed Harry completely.

"Potter!"

Harry recognized that voice. It sounded angry. And perhaps, most oddly, frightened. "You've got to help her," Harry rasped, opening his eyes to find Snape's face far too close, but too panicked to take it in.

"He's going to kill her," Harry cried. He grabbed hold of the man's robes, trying to make him understand. "Don't let him kill her." It was vital that he make the professor understand. Harry couldn't save her, he knew that, but maybe Snape could?

"Calm down, Potter," hissed Snape. He took both of Harry's hands in one of his own, prying them off his robes. Harry grabbed back at the hand and held on for dear life, feeling as though if he let go, the fog would come back to pull him into its' damp shadow.

"No! Voldemort!" Harry babbled, "She's...she's..."

The professor growled deep in his throat. He said an incantation, throwing his wand hand out to the side. A great silver animal appeared out of the end of his wand, galloped a circle around them. Harry didn't know where it went from there.

The air warmed a bit. Harry realized he was lying on the wet grass, shivering, with Snape crouched over him.

Snape looked furious. "I see Professor Lupin was not exaggerating," he said with a snarl, pulling Harry into a sitting position with the hand Harry was still clutching to his chest.

Harry let go of Snape's hand. "Sorry," He said in a trembling voice. Snape raised his hand toward Harry's face until Harry flinched back, putting up his own hand and turning his face away. He really hoped Snape wouldn't slap him when he was feeling so horrible. He swallowed hard to keep the lump in his throat from turning to tears.

"You didn't eat the chocolate?" asked Snape, sharply.

Harry shook his head once, afraid to look and see the anger on Snape's face.

"Get up, Potter," sighed Snape. He no longer sounded furious. He sounded exactly like he did the day Harry had gotten sick. The man took him by the arms and pulled him to his feet. "I sent the Dementors off."
Harry chanced a look at Snape, who still scowled, but it was a notch down from the fury of a moment ago.

Snape pulled a second chocolate bar from a pocket of his robes. "Eat this. Now, Potter," Snape commanded in an exasperated voice. He tore the wrapper off and broke it in two. He handed one piece to Harry and took a bite out of the other, muttering something to himself that sounded like "...make a saint swear."

Harry took a bite, and felt the warmth spread right to his toes, as it had on the train. Belatedly he realized what the chocolate must have been for. He breathed more easily and his trembling stopped. A great wave of embarrassment swept through him. "Sorry," he said with more conviction. How many times was this going to happen to him?

Snape finished his own chocolate, eyeing Harry speculatively. "What do you remember when the Dementors get close to you?" he asked, abruptly.

"Remember, sir?" Harry was confused. He heard a woman screaming, but he didn't know who it was.

"What do the Dementors bring to your mind?" Snape persisted.

Harry was not going to share his ruminations about the tower with Snape, "I just hear a woman. And she's screaming. Then there's a flash of green light. It's weird." Harry didn't know what compelled him to answer Snape, even that much.

For a long moment, Snape closed his eyes, as though against pain. He took a deep breath, his eyes snapped open. "Come along, then," he said, striding forward down the path that led to Hogsmeade.
Reassurance

Chapter Summary

Harry visits the oculist

There are things one should go to the grave without ever knowing.

James Potter had gone to his grave without ever knowing that Severus had done so that James and Lily might have a son. Lily had gone to her grave without ever knowing that it was Severus, who had inadvertently set Voldemort on the path to mark her family for death.

Severus would have given a great deal to go to his grave never knowing that the boy could recall, however vaguely, the night his parents were murdered.

Severus closed his eyes against the pain. His own and the boy's. After a moment he reopened them to look down at the shaken child, "Come along, then, Potter." he said, heavily. He should say something to the boy. Something comforting, perhaps. But what could one say?

Potter would not welcome it either. Severus had watched him all week. Although he turned up for classes and meals, although he spoke with his friends, there was a distance there. The boy had retreated into himself. Even Albus had tried to draw the boy out, to no avail.

Severus had seen the boy reject Lupin's overtures. According to Lupin, Potter ignored, fled from, or otherwise rebuffed every attempt to reach out to him. Severus could not see himself succeeding where the wolf failed.

Severus glanced at the pale child who walked beside him, whose jaw was set defiantly and whose hands were clenched into fists. Good. Anger was better than despair.

Severus was furious that the Dementors had dared come so close to them. The Ministry was mad, leaving the Dementors to guard the school after their part in Longbottom's death.

He was also furious at himself. He was well aware that Potter very seldom just did what he was told. He should have spelled the damned chocolate right into the boy's stomach. So, walking through the gate, the child had had no buffer at all between himself and the soul stealing creatures.

When Potter had gotten within twenty paces of the evil things, Severus had heard him whimper and turned towards the child, just in time to catch his head before it hit the turf.

Severus had to call to him several times before the boy came to, the pulse in his throat racing, cold sweat dripping from his hair.

The boy gripped Severus' robes and had begged him to help "Her". Hysterically asserting that Voldemort was going to kill her.

Ah, god, how Severus wished the boy was having flashbacks to when his hand was crushed, or his ribs broken, or getting beaten every day. But no, this had to be the child's very first memory in his life. And it had to be one that Dementors could evoke.
It appeared that Longbottom and Potter had another thing in common.

The child had stared blindly at Severus' face, not recognizing whose robes he clung to. Those green eyes held a desperate appeal, for safety, for protection. Severus peeled the small hands from his robes with his free hand

"Calm down, Potter." Severus whispered at the hysterical child. And then the boy had clung to Severus' hand, as if for dear life.

A few of the choicer epithets that Severus hadn't used in years flashed through his mind, but that was no way to drive back the Dementors.

Severus growled, as he crouched over the boy. He drew a long, disciplined breath, drawing on his tiny store of happiness to produce a Patronus.

Strangely, it seemed his Patronus was bigger and brighter than had been in years. It galloped around the both of them and the Dementors withdrew, keeping their distance now.

Severus would not think of that now. Rather he forced more chocolate on the boy and made damned sure he ate it, this time.

"Are you all right now, Potter?" Severus asked when they were a sufficient distance from the Dementors that he felt he could breathe freely again.

"Yes. Sir." Potter wiped his nose with his sleeve.

Severus shuddered and pulled out a clean handkerchief,"That's disgusting." he remarked, thrusting the handkerchief at him.

Potter skipped away from Severus, ducking as though he expected to be smacked around the ear. A move Severus recognized all too well.

This would be where the boy's reflexes for Quidditch came from.

Severus stopped to turn fully to look at the boy. When Potter had cringed away from him a moment ago, he had been caught in the grip of a Dementor-inspired memory. Now, however, the child was clearly as much in possession of his faculties as he ever was.

"What's wrong with you now, Potter?" Severus snapped.

There it was again, the defiance that, at the moment, Severus was relieved rather than irritated to see. Potter's chin went up, "Nothing, sir." Potter gritted, through clenched teeth. The honorific turned into a curse.

Severus handed the handkerchief to the child, "Wipe your nose." he said briskly.

The boy took it, looking perplexed. He ducked his head to blow his nose, but kept wary eyes on Severus.

"Did you think I was going to strike you?" asked Severus, deciding on the direct approach.

Potter shrugged, and he gave the slightest nod, as if he was reluctant to tell the truth, but also reluctant to lie.

Severus rolled his eyes, "I do believe we discussed this, Potter."
The boy looked like he did in Potions class, when faced with a difficult formula, before Granger translated it for him. Never taking his eyes off Severus, Potter twisted the handkerchief in his hands. He did not look reassured, at all. Rather his eyes seemed to get impossibly huge as his pupils contracted with what could only be fear.

"I believe I told you, I would not raise my hand to you." Severus said, softly, attempting to sound less than intimidating, but not sure if he was managing it.

"No. You didn't." Potter replied, just as quietly, but with a sharp edge to it. His fists tightened around the handkerchief.

"I beg your pardon?" Returned Severus, astonished at Potter's suddenly accusing tone.

Potter took a deep breath, apparently trying to fight down his rage. Oh, this was a Potter Severus was much more accustomed to dealing with, "You said a teacher couldn't." he hissed venomously, "You said it went against school policy. But now...you're my...my guardian." There was a slight hitch in the young Wizard's voice as he said this, "You can do anything you want, can't you? If you want to beat the hell out of me, you can. If you want, you can lock me up in-in...your dungeon." Potter stumbled over the phrase, "Without meals. For days," His voice cracked, "There's no one who's going to interfere. Is there?" Spots of color were coming out high on Potter's cheekbones.

"I assure you, Potter, I have no intention of taking up where your relatives left off." Severus said slowly and cautiously, meeting the boy's emotion with calm. This would explain much of the boy's behavior, in the last week, if these were the boy's assumptions, "I suppose I have not made myself clear enough: I will not strike you. Ever. I will not strike you, starve you or lock you in a cupboard." To be perfectly clear, Severus added, "I will not use my wand to harm you, either."

The angry color in Potter's face was replaced by frightened pallor, "Who told you about a cupboard?" he whispered.

"You did." Severus said evenly, "Don't worry if you can't recall it, you were under the influence of my diagnostic potion." He glanced down at his watch, "I think this conversation should be reserved for a later time," He looked back at the child, "But rest assured, we will continue it. Today."

Severus stared at Severus, biting his lip.

They were going to be late, "Come along, I don't wish to keep Madam Vitrea waiting." Severus told the boy. Honestly, why he had to make everything an ordeal was beyond Severus.

A few people were out in the street doing their shopping, but mostly they were inside, out of the weather. Madam Vitrea's shop was in the middle of the row of shops on the high street. A display of glasses was in the small, neat window. There was a sign in the shape of a pair of bespectacled eyes that gazed down at them, crinkling up pleasantly as they drew close. The boy was apparently impressed by it, since he stared long enough. One of the eyes winked, impudently.

The bell hung on the door jingled cheerfully as they walked in, "Severus? Is that you?" called a woman's voice from a back room.

"Yes, Iris. My apologies for our tardiness." Severus replied.

"It's fine, it's fine." replied the woman, dismissively, coming out. She was a comfortably plump witch, somewhat older than Severus. Her grey streaked, black hair was decorously braided and pinned to the top of her head. Her own eyeglasses were gold rimmed (real gold, reinforced with a magical charm so they weren't forever bending, Severus knew) with precious stones in the corners.
She dressed in robes of green and gold

She'd been the oculist in Hogsmeade since Severus had started teaching. He'd often brought one or another of his Sytherins to see her, when their parents requested him to—often there was not enough time during summer holidays and sometimes they broke their glasses while at school.

"This must be young Mr. Potter." Iris said kindly, to the boy who gave her a nervous nod and smile. Severus wished the boy would take his hands out of his pockets, but restrained himself from saying anything for now.

One of the things Severus liked about Iris was that she was never impressed by the status (or lack thereof) of children or a child's family in the Wizarding World. She bustled over to Potter with nary a glance at his scar, "I'm Madam Vitrea, the Oculist. Have you ever had your eyes checked by one?"

Potter shook his head, "N-no Madam. Just an optician."

"Quite all right. Take off your cloak and come and have a seat there, dear." she waved at the exam chair, over which hung a grey metal apparatus opposite an eye chart, "Not much difference, at all."

Potter took off his cloak, hanging it on the cloak hook, and crossed the room to sit down nervously.

"Let me see the glasses you have, Mr. Potter." Iris said, plucking them off his face and holding them up to the light.

She peered up at them interestingly, "Oh, yes. You've been adjusting these for a while. Nearly worn out, and they're made of plastic as well. Won't hold up under any more spells, I daresay. I suppose that's what the masking tape is about, is it?" She said briskly.

The boy bit his lip and the color was back in his cheeks. Severus thought his eyes looked a little too bright.

It came to Severus like a thunderclap, the memory of standing with his mother, as she paid for a set of second hand robes for him. The feeling of mortification. How he had muttered to the shop girl about needing them for Herbology, so he wouldn't get his (nonexistent) good ones dirty.

"Ah, well, his proper pair were broken at Quidditch last week. The boy took a header off his broom and he's been wearing his spare pair, since." Severus lied smoothly, "They were Muggle made, you know. Sometimes the repairing charms just don't work well on some of their newer materials."

Potter's mouth dropped open and he stared at Severus, as if he'd never seen him before.

"Yes, of course. Plastics." Iris sniffed disdainfully, although she gave Severus a significant look. She turned with a smile for the boy, "We'll get you some with a nice self-repairing charm then, shall we?"

"Yes, please." the child said enthusiastically, as though Iris had just offered him a brand new broomstick.

"You'd best make a spare pair, as well." Said Severus, "Given that those are worn out."

"Naturally," replied Iris, as she adjusted something in the grey apparatus before pulling it down, eye level to the child, "Now just look through here." she told the boy, indicating the eyepiece,. "Do you see the writing?"

"Uh, no." said Potter, doing as she said.
"Tell me when you can." she fiddled with some knobs on the grey metal.

"Now." said the boy.

Iris smiled, she waved her wand and the curtains closed over the windows, "Now I'm going to look inside your eye for a moment. It will feel very odd, but it shouldn't hurt. I'm going to shine a light in your eye" she pointed her wand at Potter, muttering an incantation.

"Oh!" Potter jerked back, for just a second, away from Iris' instrument.

Severus got a look at the child's eyes, without his spectacles, with huge pupils in the dim light. He looked very young and curiously vulnerable. The sight gave Severus a strange tightness in his chest.

"It's all right, dear. I told you it felt odd." said Iris kindly, "Just come back to where I can see them."

"What are you looking for?" Potter asked, nervously.

Iris peered through the instrument, back at Potter's eyes as she said, "Well, at the moment, I'm looking at the structures inside your eyes. And then I'm going to measure your eye and your cornea. And then we'll see what strength of glass you need." Iris, replied, a little absently, pointing her wand at her own glasses, magnifying her vision.

"Why do Wizards even need glasses?" asked Potter, a little irritably, Severus thought, "Why doesn't my magic just fix my eyes?"

"Because, as far as your magic is concerned, there's nothing wrong with your eyes. It's merely a variation in the shape of your eyes or, in your case, in the shape of your cornea." Iris explained patiently, "There are spells, of course to fix them, but we can't perform them on children while they're growing. And it's rather expensive, honestly. It doesn't work for everyone, either." She stopped peering through the instrument and fiddled with a different knob. "All right, tell me when the writing is clear and then read from the top."

After a few second, Potter said, "Now." then read out a series of letters.

Iris humfed to herself, "Do your old glasses give you headaches?" she asked, sharply.

"Umm, I guess." replied Potter, shrugging.

"I'll give you some temporary glasses, right now." Iris said, She exchanged a dark look with Severus. Clearly she had recognized the Quidditch story for what it was.

"You're magic has been working overtime to adjust those. And then, it could only adjust them so far without breaking them." Iris explained. She vanished the offending frames with a little flick of her wand.

"Why can't I just transfigure some to the right strength?" asked Potter.

"Because lenses are made to bend light. If you make them with magic, they don't last. Crystal is so much more durable."

"Crystal?" asked the boy. Severus wished he'd be half that inquisitive in class. On the other hand, perhaps one Granger was enough.

"Mm, we use rock crystal, usually quartz. Muggles used it too, before glass became so much more inexpensive." Iris told the boy. She paused for breath, warming to her subject, "Light is one of those
odd things that act the same for Wizards as for Muggles. If you talk to Professor McGonagall, she'll explain it far better than myself. Wizards invented crystal prisms and from there crystal lenses, but only because it's so much easier to shape the crystal with magic. Muggle and Wizards worked together in the early days of optics. The Statute of Wizarding Secrecy was fairly new, you see. Not everyone abided by it. You're Muggle raised?"

Potter nodded, carefully.

"You've heard of lasers?" Iris continued to speak while went to her sideboard where she kept a series of glass lenses in a boxe. She glanced at the little card where Potter's prescription was recorded magically and pulled out lenses of the correct strength.

"Yes."

Iris spelled a quick set of frames onto the lenses, "They're Muggle inventions that work almost like magic, it's really fascinating. They can produce effects that look just like magic."

"My cousin has a CD player-it's got a little light inside of it that reads the music somehow." Potter told her, thoughtfully.

Iris beamed, "Just so." she replied.

She handed the pair to the boy, "These will do, until I can make you proper ones. These are just glass and wire." she said, standing.

"Let's go find you a pair of frames you like." She said as she flicked her wand and the curtains slowly opened. The glass of the windows was a smoky grey that slowly lightened to clear to give one's eyes the chance to adjust to daylight again.

"Which ones do you like?" asked Iris, beckoning the child over and indicating the wall where the sample frames were kept. There were, at least, a hundred different types.

The child had no business looking as if Father Christmas had appeared with a full bag goodies, thought Severus.

Potter also tried to stay down at the inexpensive end, Severus noticed.

"Severus?" asked Iris quietly, coming over to him while the child was examining himself in the mirror wearing a pair of (in all honesty) unbecoming dark frames, not unlike his old ones, "Not meaning to be crass here, but what is the boy's budget?"

Severus wrote a number down on a spare bit of parchment and handed it to her. It was not unheard of for the Headmaster (or Severus himself) to pay for glasses for students who were too poor to afford their own.

Iris raised an eyebrow, but ever the professional, asked no questions, "If I might make a suggestion, dear?" she said going back to the boy, "I think with your face, you might be better off with these." She plucked a pair of gold wire frames from the other end of the display. "Can't go wrong with gold." she said cheerfully.

"Oh, these are brilliant!" exclaimed the child out loud. They were, indeed much more flattering than the last pair. Then his face fell a little and he sighed, rather wistfully. Potter glanced at Severus, before he asked, quietly, "How much would these cost?"

"For these frames, ten galleons and for each charm another galleon." Iris said gently, "But it's all
within the budget Professor Snape named."

Iris went to the desk, listing the charms she could put on the glasses. "Self-repairing is a must, in someone your age. Since you play Quidditch, we'll put on an impervious, as well. And a self tinting charm? For bright days?"

Potter looked as though he might object, so Severus cut in, before he could start, "Those are all fine. And whatever else you think reasonable, in a wizard Mr. Potter's age."

"I can have these made up this afternoon. Can you bring Mr. Potter back this afternoon, or will it be Monday? Those temporary ones should last that long."

Severus glanced at the boy, "We have some errands to run in the village, we'll pick them up on our way back."

Iris smiled, "Of course, Severus. It'll be about two hours."

"Come along, Potter." Severus handed the boy his cloak, not wanting to give him time to panic about money.

Severus glanced at his watch, "We'll get a meal at the Three Broomsticks." He pronounced.

Potter nodded, hurrying to keep up.

Neither one said anything while they walked. Severus was thinking through the conversation he knew he had to have with the boy.

They entered the busy pub, and Severus headed straight to the back, glaring at anyone who tried to come close enough to speak to the boy. He had no interest in allowing Potter to speak to any of his adoring fans.

The boy kept close behind Severus, as if he had the same goal in mind. When they sat down at the table, he looked around interestingly, but he didn't speak or meet Severus' eyes.

Rosmerta came to take their order, in the interest of simplicity, Severus ordered for both of them and the boy didn't object.

"Did you bring your potion?" Severus asked.

The child nodded, pulling it out of his pocket. He unscrewed it and drank it with a grimace.

Again, Severus was grateful that formulation had anti-anxiety properties. To be safe, Severus cast a muffliato.

"It appears you have some...concerns, about our arrangement." Severus said quietly.

Potter looked at Severus and then looked away, again. "I'm fine." he gritted.

"Potter," sighed Severus, "You are a terrible liar." He raised one eyebrow at the boy.

"All right, then," the boy growled, "Why you?"

Rosmerta brought over their order before Severus answered, "Because I was the only one who could, at the time." he replied evenly, "And do it quietly." he paused, "I imagine we'll be able to change it before the school year is out. Since you never go home for holidays, nobody beyond a select few need know."
Potter ate for a few minutes, apparently thinking, "So...why do you care if my glasses are broken and my robes are in a state?" he didn't look up from his plate, "Nobody will blame you."

"I do not 'care', Potter." replied Severus, glad that he'd ordered a lager. He really wanted a firewhiskey, but that wouldn't look good while sitting with a student, "I have never much cared for what other people think of me." He overlooked the quiet snort from the boy, "This is a matter of duty. At the moment, I am your guardian and it is my duty to see that your needs are met. Nothing more."

"But...those glasses...they're expensive. I could have gotten something else...and I don't need two pairs..." Potter said quietly.

Severus put his knife and fork down. Mrs. Evan's favorite phrase coming back to him again (he'd almost forgotten where it had come from), "Potter, you are enough to make a saint swear." he said in exasperation, "The money is not an issue, and I will not have someone half blind creating a hazard in my laboratory. And an extra pair is only prudent for someone who falls from brooms as often as yourself."

"Oh." Potter had almost finished inhaling his food. Severus might have been tempted to chide the boy on wolfing it down, if he didn't realize it was a side effect of the potion.

Severus applied himself to his own food again.

"Erm, we don't have to get robes today." Potter said after a moment, of looking at the table "If you have other things to do."

Severus waved his hand dismissively. "Not to worry, Potter. My day is clear until this evening. If you are still hungry, I believe Madam Rosmerta has some treacle tart available. She generally does on a Saturday."

Potter looked at him with the same almost dumbfounded expression he'd had in the Oculist's, "Why are you being so nice?" the child asked suspiciously, as if he couldn't stop himself.

In truth, he may not have been able to. Severus had changed the formula to increase the anti anxiety properties; that tended to loosen the tongue.

Severus took a drink before answering coolly, "This is not 'nice', this is 'responsible'. Clearly you are unaccustomed to seeing such behavior in the adults around you."

Involuntarily, Severus flashed on the sight of Neville Longbottom's eyes, open and staring in death. He felt cold inside as he realized that the statement, unavoidably, must include himself.
Lunch with Snape

Chapter Summary

Our boys finish their lunch and then go shopping.

The night Harry had found out he was a wizard was almost as strange as today was turning out to be.

He, Harry, was sitting in a pub, eating treacle tart, with Professor Bloody Snape. What was more, Snape had spent the afternoon being quite decent to him, again. Even when Harry ducked what he'd assumed had been a hand coming to box his ears, Snape had not lost his calm. He had assured Harry that he would not take up where the Dursleys left off.

Of course, that might all change when he couldn't get rid of Harry.

For the moment, Harry was pleased. It was nice just to be able to see properly, with a pair of glasses he wasn't shoving up his nose every five minutes. The temporary glasses the oculist had given him fitted him better than the glasses he'd had since he was eight ever had. And Harry saw immediately what she meant about headaches—he didn't feel he had to strain to see things with these. He couldn't wait to get back onto the Quidditch pitch to try them out.

Did Snape really mean for him to spend (Harry did a quick guesstimate) probably sixty galleons on glasses? Harry didn't remember what the exchange rate for pounds was, but he'd guess it was a lot. Harry had tried to stay down the end where frames were marked with one galleon or two galleon tags.

He remembered, vividly, the fuss Aunt Petunia had made at the opticians—the exam had been covered by the system, but not the glasses themselves, "Just give him the cheapest ones you have," she'd said, giving him a look, "He'll only break them or lose them, anyway."

The optician had given him a kind, sympathetic smile, but Harry had been mortified.

Well, he'd never broken them. Now, he had to wonder if that wasn't due to his magic. No matter what Dudley or Uncle Vernon served up, his glasses were whole at the end of it. Come to think of it, Dudley had stolen them a few times, but they always found their way back to his cupboard.

Snape was being so weird. When the oculist had made a comment about Harry's old glasses, Snape had come to his rescue. Making it sound as if Harry's regular pair had fallen prey to a broomstick accident. What the hell was that about? Snape had acted almost like he understood Harry's embarrassment.

Harry couldn't help but wonder: where was the money coming from that Snape was spending? From this mysterious support fund? How many months worth of that had Snape just blown? Perhaps the whole year's worth?

The hot meal (and not to mention treacle tart) was making Harry feel a bit braver, so he said, "Sir?" he thought he'd be a bit more direct about the clothing thing than he had been a moment ago. He'd been trying to give the man an out, without being obvious.

"Yes, Potter?" The professor used a civil enough tone. Perhaps, Harry should always talk to him
"Er..Do I still have enough...I mean...I know robes are expensive...I usually spend about a hundred galleons and my glasses...well, I was..."

"Potter, stop rambling, and ask your question." Snape growled, losing patience.

Harry bit his lip, took a deep breath, "Well, can I afford...?"

Snape rolled his eyes again, "Yes, Potter. You are well within your budget. Assuming we don't buy any solid gold cauldrons to go with your glasses."

Harry blinked. That was nearly a joke. He looked at Snape's impassive face, trying to decide if the man meant it as such, "Well...so...what? It's going to be covered by this support fund? Is that for the year, then?"

Snape finished off the rest of his pint. Harry almost got the idea that he was stalling for time, planning his response.

"For the month." Snape finally said quietly, meeting Harry's eyes, "The fund is substantial."

"Are you telling me, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were getting almost two hundred galleons a month for keeping me?" Harry said, trying to work out how many pounds that would be. He'd never mentioned his vault at Gringott's to the Dursleys because he knew they would try to get hold of it. Now it seemed that they already had gotten at least some.

Snape cleared his throat, "The exact sum is actually nearer four hundred galleons. I must admit I was surprised myself, by the figure."

"How many pounds is that?" whispered Harry, his brain not taking it in.

Snape looked at Harry, with an unreadable expression, "I have no idea."

Harry's breath caught in his chest and he looked away. It was good news. It really was. He didn't need to worry that whoever ended up being his guardian would be hurting for gold. He wouldn't be a burden. So it was good news.

But, why was it making his throat hurt and his eyes prickle?

"Took you in out of the kindness of our hearts." Aunt Petunia said, in his head, "Ungrateful little freak."

"Can I wait for you outside?" Harry found himself asking Snape.

Snape gave him a sharp look, "I think not. But it is time to go"

Harry stood quickly. For some reason, this was even more upsetting than finding out Snape was his guardian. He wanted to get outside, away from people, before he started doing something stupid, like crying. At least outside, he could pass tears off as the product of the cold wind. Snape stood and dropped some coins on the table, led the way out to the street.

Harry took grateful gulps of the cold air. Snape was watching him with narrowed eyes, "Are you all right, Potter?"

Harry nodded. What else was he supposed to do? It wasn't as if anyone (especially Snape) really wanted to know. Harry scrubbed at his eyes under his glasses, trying to convince himself that his
eyes were running from the sharp, raw wind..

There was something about the Dursleys being paid to take him that made his skin creep. Always, they had told him that they took him in from pure charity. Merely because of the blood bond between he and Petunia. They'd said as much, any number of times. That though he was a freak, and a terrible burden, they were doing their duty by him. Blood was thicker than water and that was the only reason they took him.

"Potter?" Snape said, again.

"Fine." Harry grunted. And then, because it seemed he'd explode if he didn't say something, he hissed, "They always made me wear Dudley's cast-offs. Did you know that?"

"That would be your cousin?" asked Snape, quite casually, as if inquiring about the weather. He wasn't looking at Harry now, he was brushing the wrinkles out of his robes, "No. I didn't."

"Aunt Petunia said they couldn't afford to keep freaks in clothes. She said I was taking food out of Dudley's mouth." He spat, "She always said that. And Marge said...she said..." Harry could picture Marge suddenly, very clearly in his mind, as she told him that his parents left him to be raised by the charity of his aunt and uncle. Of the nasty look of triumph, when she'd told him that he'd been left destitute by a pair of drunks. How, though his parents were such that the world was better without them, because of the ties of blood and family, the Dursleys had taken him in at great personal and financial cost.

Even after Harry discovered he was a wizard, he'd assumed they'd been telling the truth about how much money they had to spend to feed and clothe him.

"What did Marge say?" asked Snape, curiously.

"She called my mother a bitch." Harry ground his teeth again, "The night I blew her up. She said that my mother was a bitch who married a wastrel."

"That is what caused the accidental magic?" asked Snape.

Harry nodded, angrily. He crossed his arms across his chest, under his cloak, waiting for Snape to lay into him about it.

Instead Snape snorted. If it had been anyone else, Harry would have been tempted to say it was a laugh, "I understand it took the Magic Reversal Squad a good half hour to put her right." A twitch of the lips that was a suppressed smirk. Harry's back stiffened, the bastard was laughing at him.

Then Snape sighed and went back to his usual dour demeanor, "I assure you, you were never taking food out of anyone's mouth." he said stiffly, "We will correct the deficiencies in your wardrobe today." he seemed to hesitate, before continuing, "I'm sure you've realized by now, your father's family was quite well off. And your mother made some arrangements, through a Muggle solicitor that I have written to. It is quite likely that there might well be some money from that quarter, as well."

Harry really, really didn't want to discuss this anymore. He supposed he should be grateful that Snape wanted to keep this secret, else the Slytherins would have a field day. The Boy Who Lived; wearing cast-offs and sleeping in a cupboard.

Snape was going on inexorably, "According to the other teachers, you do have your textbooks. Did you have need for any other supplies for school?"
Harry shook his head, not changing his stance.

"I assume you ordered everything by owl?"

Harry nodded.

"Why didn't you order new robes that way?" Snape didn't sound angry, merely curious.

"I only had enough gold for one or the other." Harry muttered, embarrassed. Any minute now, Snape was going to laugh at him for his Hermione-ish tendencies, "It was what I had left over from my trip last year."

"How much gold are you accustomed to withdrawing at a time?" Snape asked, thoughtfully.

"I always take out about two hundred galleons." said Harry, "Didn't spend it all last years because there were a few things I didn't need to buy again. So I saved what was left over."

Snape's eyebrows went up, "All of it?"

"Well, yeah." replied Harry, "What do I have to spend it on, while I'm here? I get meals and everything. Even Hedwig's taken care of while we're here."

Snape was giving him that "You're-a-bug-I'm-about-to-chop-into-potion-ingredients" look again and Harry shivered involuntarily.

"Come along, Potter." Said Snape, "We've stood here, in the cold, long enough."

Harry nodded, trotting along beside the tall man. Snape's face was set into its' usual impassive expression, although Harry thought he felt the man giving him glances now and then.

They came to a shop whose sign proclaimed: Tatty's. Fine robes since 1453

"This will do." Remarked Snape, guiding Harry in with a hand on his shoulder.

The shop was smaller than Madame Malkin's, in Diagon Alley. On one wall a row of balck Hogwart's robes hung neatly, on the other wall, a veritable rainbow of robes. At the back was a wall lined with mirrors. Bright daylight sifted in from skylights in the ceiling.

Harry looked again. The sky through the skylights was false, since they showed a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. As Harry looked, a bird merrily flew across the clouds. After the chill grey of the outside, it gave Harry a warm I-love-magic feeling.

"Professor Snape? Oh, Sir. What can I do for you?" An oily voice called. A man almost as small as Professor Flitwik was standing at the cash register in the back.

"Mr. Potter needs robes for school." Snape said.

The man did a double take, then pulled out his tape measure as he hurried down the shop to them, "MR POTTER! Indeed! A great honor to meet you! Oh, yes of course." he stared avidly at Harry's scar, "A great honor!"

Harry felt his cheeks warm, he dropped his eyes and unconsciously tugged on his fringe to pull it down over the scar.

"And, what shall I get for you, sir? Something in velvet, to impress the witches, eh?" The man asked jovially.
Professor Snape cleared his throat, "I think we will make due with the regulation school robes. Thank you, very much." he said icily.

"What, buying your robes this late in the year?" asked the man, surprised, "Come to school without them?"

"Yes, well, Mr Potter's family is Muggle." Replied Snape, not giving Harry the chance to reply himself. "Generally he goes with the family of one of his housemates, but they were away this year. Professor Mcgonagall was going to bring him the first week, but..." Snape trailed off significantly.

The shop keeper nodded, suddenly grave, "Oh, yes. She's been in London, hasn't she? Over the Longbottom affair? Terrible tragedy, just terrible. I knew the boy's parents, you know." He sighed, "What's going to become of the uncle? Have they decided?"

Harry involuntarily sucked in his breath at the indirect reference to Neville. He didn't know why it was so upsetting. Probably because this day had him feeling all sorts of off-balance.

"Dementor's Kiss was the last I heard." Snape replied, darkly. Harry wondered what that was.

"I understand you knew the lad, Mr. Potter." said the shopkeeper, "Mrs. Longbottom said you were in the same year as he."

Harry nodded, stiffly.

"That is neither here, nor there." Snape said archly, unexpectedly coming to Harry's rescue. He gave the shopkeeper one of his fiercest glares, "I think it is best that you just take the boy's size and get on with it."

"Oh, yes. Of course." The shopkeeper replied, fawningly.

The shopkeeper kept his comments to a minimum after that, fitting Harry for robes with alacrity. Probably Snape standing there with his arms crossed, glancing at his watch every few minutes likely gave the man incentive to hurry.

Finally, the Harry had everything on the list ordered, as well as a load of extra things Snape deemed necessary. Boots and trainers, as well as shoes to wear to class, an extra cloak, and a stack of socks and underwear.

The shopkeeper became more servile as the order increased. Harry was relieved when they were finally done, and could leave the shop. Professor Snape ordered everything to be delivered to Harry's dorm, that afternoon.

"I will expect you to appear at dinner looking a bit less disheveled, Mr. Potter." Snape told him as they left, "Please, see to it that you toss those in the rubbish." he gave Harry's current robes a disdainful glance.

"They're not that bad." grumbled Harry.

Snape raised one eyebrow, but didn't say anything further.

Well, okay, they were, Harry had to admit to himself, fingering the threadbare sleeve, but he'd be damned if he'd agree with Snape

"I need to stop by the apothecary's while we're here." announced Snape, "I would appreciate if you would refrain from embarrassed me, while we're there. Mr Wold's appearance is quite startling."
Harry glared at Snape, but said nothing.

This shop had no display in the front window. The shop itself was floor to ceiling shelves filled with jars. As one came in the door directly to the right was a counter with a man standing behind it. He looked up and turned to them, as the door closed.

Harry had to bite back a gasp. He had never seen someone so scarred.

The left side of the man's face was perfectly smooth and unmarked. His features were regular and even handsome, but the right side had the look of a melted candle.

Where the right eye should have been, there was a flap of skin that fused to the man's cheek in pink and white lumps. The right side of his nose was completely without flesh; it was just thin skin drawn over cartilage, with no nostril on that side. The mouth had no lips and sagged on the right side, pulled down into a permanent grimace. It looked as though the skin had been burned down to the man's underlying skull. The cheekbone and the jawbone standing out harshly.

"Hello, Severus." The man's mouth twisted. It took a moment for Harry to realize it was meant to be a smile.

Professor Snape, smiled at the man, "How are you, Marcus?" Harry had never heard Snape so friendly with anyone before.

"Oh, you know, business is good. Can't complain." He turned to pick up a package, behind the counter, "Here's your order."

As he handed it to Snape, Harry saw that the right hand was similarly burned. He wondered if it were the man's whole side, or if he'd put up his hand to try to shield his face.

Harry quickly looked away, before either of the adults could catch him staring. Instead he looked at the many jars on the walls. Some were full of dried plants, others liquid of varying colors, some contained bits of things Harry didn't even like to speculate on.

Snape and the apothecary exchanged more pleasantries before Snape said, "Yes, this is our Mr. Potter."

Harry looked towards the man and said "Hello, sir." very quietly. He steeled himself and managed to look him in the (one) eye, without blanching

"Mr. Potter." The apothecary grinned that parody of a smile at Harry, but he didn't seem to expect further conversation.

After a few minutes, Snape's purchases were checked and paid for and tucked way in the man's robes (shrinking spells were very useful, Harry thought).

They were half a block away from the shop when Snape said, grudgingly, "I appreciate that you didn't allow Mr. Wold's appearance bother you."

"What happened to his face?" Harry asked quietly. His own scar was famous and drew stares, but really, it was easy enough to hide. The attention it drew was also mostly positive, Harry had to admit, even if it was a bit overwhelming at times. It didn't make people look away.

"Potion's accident. An explosion." grunted Snape, "That is why I do not allow horseplay in my laboratory."
"Oh." Harry realized that he needed to spend some time thinking on today.

"I believe Madam Vitrea will have your glasses ready. We should have them fitted and then head back to the castle." Snape said.

Harry nodded.

"I should mention, Potter," The man said slowly as they walked, "Professor Burbage has started a discussion group with some of the students who have had difficulties with their families. It's open to anyone who wants to join. It may do you some good."

Harry shrugged. That was not going to happen, the last thing Harry wanted to do was discuss the Dursleys, and it was certain to get out if he talked about it in a group.

"If you worry about keeping this arrangement secret, I assure you that Professor Burbage uses privacy spells to ensure no talks out of turn." Snape went on, "However, it is strictly up to you."

It seemed like the man was waiting for some reply, so Harry settled on, "Yes, sir."

"I should also mention that the Weasleys have spoken to the headmaster about taking over this responsibility, when we can arrange it quietly."

"They did?" asked Harry, hopefully.

"Until that happy day, I suggest we both try to make the best of things." Snape continued in that dry, arch tone. He sounded like he did when he was giving his first lecture of the year, "I will no more tolerate rule breaking than I ever have, but assuming you can avoid your more Colourful escapades, I believe we can both cope with this."

"Yes, Sir." sighed Harry.

By this time they had arrived at the Oculist's again. Snape opened the door and waved Harry inside.

It took no time for Madam Vitrea to fit his glasses. Harry marveled at the change the new glasses made. First Harry thought they made him look older, then he decided they didn't, but they had the effect of making him look just...better. The metal picked up the color of his eyes and the clear crystal made them more visible.

Snape stood in the background, with that curious assessing stare again.

"He really does have his mother's eyes." Madam Vitrea, remarked to Snape, "Such a vivid green. I'd make a fortune if I could replicate the colour."

"You knew my mother?" asked Harry, "When she was in school?"

"Oh, she was in the healer's program at St. Mungo's. I worked in the hospital, then." replied Madam Vitrea, "But, I believe Professor Snape was in the same year as she."

Harry turned his startled gaze to Snape, "Did you know my mother, then?"

"Yes, Potter. I did." Snape replied quietly, "Now if you are done admiring yourself, I think it's high time we returned to the castle."
Chapter Summary

In which Severus has a conference with concerned parties.

Severus had just one more meeting, before he could retire to his rooms and some well earned peace and quiet.

The afternoon with Potter was more disturbing than Severus liked to admit. It had been upsetting to watch the boy's reaction to the amount of money Petunia had been receiving to keep him. Severus had found himself in the uncomfortable place again, wanting to offer a word of comfort without knowing how.

Interesting that Potter's impulse to not accept charity seemed to come from the same place Severus' own did-having been on the receiving end of grudging charity once too often. Petunia would surely have sent the boy to an orphanage, if not for the monthly checks from Gringott's. However, she had seen to it that she had the boy thinking she'd taken him in out of the dubious kindness of her nonexistent heart.

It might have been better had the boy actually gone into the system. Eventually, one of the people in the Wizard Child Protection Office would have heard about it. Sadly though, that would have brought it right around to the Ministry handing Potter off to the highest bidder.

This meeting tonight was with all the individuals that Dumbledore deemed it necessary to know about Potter's changed status. Severus had insisted that he speak with them all at once. After the meeting with Dumbledore last week, Severus had decided he wasn't going to go through that again. Or at least more times than was necessary, so he'd agreed to meet with them, as soon as Minerva and Poppy came back.

It would be difficult to tell Minerva. James Bloody Potter and his gang had been the apple of Minerva's eye. Potter and his treacherous best friend, Black, had both been brilliant in her specialty, Transfiguration. Harry Potter was one of her favorites too, although he was never as good at Transfiguration as his father (it was getting more and more difficult to deny that, except in looks, Harry actually resembled the elder Potter less than Severus had originally thought).

It was likely that Minerva would be three kinds of livid, both over the truth of Potter's treatment at the Dursleys and the truth of his parentage. Although Severus respected her as a colleague and liked her (as much as he ever liked anyone)as a person, she had never married herself and, perhaps, wouldn't understand the lengths a witch might go to when caught up in the longing for a child.

Severus truly wished there was some way around telling her, but Dumbledore felt that keeping the truth from her would be more dangerous. As Potter's head of house, she had full access to his files. She could inadvertently stir up trouble by inquiring why Harry wasn't going back to the Dursleys.

Poppy would be fine. Severus had always worked well with her and as a healer, she understood that in many Wizard families, certain arrangements had been made. He knew for a fact that she had made this Occludus Paternus potion once while he had been a teacher at Hogwarts. Severus had never asked for whom was she making it; he'd merely provided her with the grimoire that contained the
The other parties that Dumbledore had to explain it to were Molly and Arthur Weasley, if they were going to get their cooperation to take the child off his hands and do it quietly. No telling how the two of them would react to this.

So, they were all meeting at Dumbledore's office now. Severus thought he'd prefer to face a full Wizengamot, with life in Azkaban on the line.

He stood before Dumbledore's gargoyle, took a long breath, squaring his shoulders. He felt like he was entering a Death Eater meeting, with a pissed off Dark Lord presiding. Perhaps Minerva would be angry enough to cruciate Severus, when she heard his tale.

"Blood pops." he said to the gargoyle, which jumped aside.

"...worried about Ginny, to be honest." a woman's voice was saying, "She just doesn't sound like herself. I've been wondering if we shouldn't have her home. After what happened..."

"Now, Molly, we'll keep an eye on her." Dumbledore was saying in a conciliatory voice. The Weasleys were already there, having apparently come by floo.

"Headmaster." Severus said in his chilliest voice. He was not pleased with having had to provide the headmaster with the memory, but it had been that or Veritaserum, if he was going to keep the formidable Wizards esteem (and his job).

In a way, Severus couldn't fault Dumbledore, after having come to the man fourteen years ago with the knowledge that the Dark Lord was pursuing the Potters because of Severus.

Severus thrust that thought aside ruthlessly. Self castigation would not get him through this evening.

"Severus." Dumbledore's voice was warm and welcoming. Clearly the scene in the Pensieve had reassured him. Severus had avoided speaking to the old bastard all week, save for one or two conversations regarding the boy's sudden aversion to talking to anyone other than his sidekicks.

Severus remembered how still the old man had gone, when Severus had presented him with Harry's exam report and then with the document that spelled out the new custodial arrangements.

Dumbledore had spent a good fifteen minutes reading through the medical report, "I knew they weren't entirely happy with taking Harry in, but I never imagined they were capable of this." he'd said in a very quiet voice.

Which reminded Severus, he needed to have Poppy look at the boy's hand. Severus didn't like the child's habit of clenching it and shaking it out as if it pained him. It was possible it hadn't healed right.

The headmaster picked up his wand and conjured a comfortable green armchair next to Molly Weasley, "Please, sit down Severus. We're waiting for the rest of us."

Severus nodded at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They exchanged an indecipherable look and a nod with each other.

"Hello, Professor Snape." said Mrs. Weasley, "It's good to see you." She smiled at him gently and he inclined his head graciously. He had to stay in their good graces, at all costs. He had seen the hope in the boy's eyes when he'd mentioned the possibility of the Weasley's taking custody of him. Severus was uncomfortably aware that he didn't like to disappoint the child, not after what he'd heard and
Severus was no sooner seated than the door opened and Poppy and Minerva entered.

Both witches looked tired, having just arrived back at the castle that afternoon. Minerva, especially, looked exhausted, her eyes sunken and shadowed. There seemed to be many more lines around her mouth and a new streak of white adorned her pinned up grey hair. She and Augusta Longbottom had been schoolmates, and both Frank and Alice had been Gryffindors. Losing Longbottom had been like losing one of her own grandchildren.

Severus shook his head. None of them would have thought that it was possible that a student could be being abused so harshly, right under their noses. It seemed that Neville Longbottom, like many victims of abuse, had gone to some pains to hide the injuries his uncle had caused him. Most likely in a misguided attempt to protect his grandmother.

Dumbledore had offered to show each head of house the inquest report. Severus would have to read it; he was not looking forward to yet another helping of guilt.

He missed Dumbledore's greeting to the women, not hearing what the old man was saying until, "...Remus joins us."

Severus glared at Dumbledore, "So you've invited Lupin, as well?" he growled.

"I thought it prudent, as he already is aware of the circumstances, and witnessed the documents." replied Dumbledore serenely.

Dentist-Severus definitely had to see a dentist. Granger's parents were dentists, perhaps they'd give him a referral to someone who treated tooth grinding. He was getting very tired of constant headaches.

Perhaps, he should make it a matter of course to at least take a calming draft, before coming to Dumbledore's office.

"I believe that you four should read the report, from the exam Severus did on Harry, before we speak of anything else." Dumbledore went on, gravely to the others in the room, "Remus witnessed the exam, so we needn't wait for him for that." The elderly wizard waved his wand and a copy of the report appeared floating in the air in front of each of them.

Severus watched their faces as they scanned the parchment. Poppy's hand came up to cover her open mouth. She slowly sat down in the chair conjured for her by the headmaster.

Minerva looked up at Dumbledore, before she even finished, "I told you." she hissed, sounding remarkably liker her feline animagus form. In two strides, the tall woman crossed to Dumbledore's desk and slammed the parchment down on it, "I TOLD you!"

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had taken each other's hand. Mrs. Weasley was shaking her head, "I knew there was something not right, but I couldn't get him to tell me anything when he stayed with us. I wrote to his Aunt and Uncle. Never heard back...I assumed they were just put off by owl post..." she trailed off.

Poppy's eyes were huge, "We can't take this to the Ministry." she whispered, never taking her hand from her mouth, as if fearing what she had to say. "The anti-Muggle sentiment...People will go mad. There will be killings."

Oh, Severus always knew Poppy was quick, but then she was a half blood. She saw certain things seen.
more clearly, because of her outsider status.

"No. We can't." agreed Dumbledore, quietly.

Arthur Weasley looked up, sharply, from the paper to Severus, "This would be the reason for the letter Ron sent me, then?"

Severus nodded, "I have already taken custody of the boy." he admitted quietly.

Stunned silence reigned.

"But...how?" gasped Minerva, at last, "Albus? Did you talk someone into...?"

Dumbledore sighed, "No. And I fear, at the moment, the Wizengamot would want to try the thing in full session. And naturally, that would cause the press to become involved."

The little Hufflepuff girl was proof of that. Although her name was withheld, her story had been the stuff of Skeeter's "Special Interest" column for the past week.

There would have been no keeping this quiet.

"Professor Snape," Mrs. Weasley said, in a very low voice, "Is there some blood relationship between you and Harry?"

Severus nodded once.

"Perhaps...perhaps your father and Lily's parents, then?" asked Minerva, a little desperately, "But that makes no sense." she answered her own question, "I don't understand."

Severus felt Poppy staring hard at him. He took a deep breath, "Potter is...biologically...my..."

Severus couldn't say it, "My...offspring."

Minerva was quite still for a moment, then she rounded on Severus, "What did you do?" she demanded.

This was not unlike Dumbledore's reaction the previous week, although Dumbledore's outrage had been expressed more quietly. Dumbledore, in a rage, was enough to freeze one solid.

Minerva's version of it was much easier to cope with, for Severus, "I helped Lily with her...problem." he answered sourly, standing to match her height.

"Are your expecting us to believe Lily Potter played the harlot with you, voluntarily?" Minerva demanded, drawing her wand.

Severus' wand was in his hand, before Minerva could say another word, "Have a care, Minerva." he hissed.

"But, that's what you're saying, isn't it?" Minerva was furious, her eyes wild, "So either it was rape, or Lily was whor..."

"Minerva" said Poppy sharply, "Stop it. Let Severus speak." she had risen too, and was ready to hex them both, by the look of things.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, loudly, "Minerva, I quite understand your reaction, but Severus has provided me with the memory of the circumstances. They are quite...extraordinary. And I don't believe Severus has any reason to feel guilt, in this instance."
Oh no, not in this instance. The old bastard was so careful with his words.

"Oh, no?" she wheeled around on her heel, "And what possible circumstances could excuse sexual relations with a married woman?"

Severus had not taken his wand off of Minerva, nor would he until she calmed down, but he lowered his tip a trifle, "James Potter was infertile." he said in a low voice.

Severus was aware that Mrs. Weasley had made a little "Oh." of comprehension, although he didn't look at her.

Minerva just blinked, "And that involved you, how?" she asked sharply.

"Lily used the Occludus potion? Didn't she?" asked Poppy softly.

Severus nodded, never taking his eyes off Minerva.

Minerva turned to look at Poppy, "What's that?" she asked sharply.

Poppy opened her mouth to answer, but it was Dumbledore who spoke, "It is used to make a child resemble a man, so that they might be taken as father and son."

"So, it is used to hide infidelity." Minerva's voice was clipped and tight.

"Actually, generally not." put in Mrs. Weasley, unexpectedly, "It's used in those cases where a woman merely wants her child to resemble her husband. Often, where the husband can't father children."

"James and Lily were trying to conceive a child, Minerva." Lupin said, quietly.

Severus started a little, not having heard the man come into the room. Damn, that shouldn't happen.

Minerva turned her head toward Lupin, "What are you saying, Remus?"

"Both of you, put up your wands." Dumbledore said softly, "This helps no one."

After one last poisonous look at Severus, Minerva dropped her wand, although she didn't put it away. Severus tucked his own back into his robes.

Dumbledore waved his wand, conjuring a glass of wine before each of them. Minerva took hers out of the air and sat down slowly in another conjured chair.

Severus and Poppy both took their seats, as well.

"Remus and I have both examined the memory Severus left for us in my Pensieve, and we are both satisfied that it was as Severus has stated." proclaimed Dumbledore.

Severus lifted his chin a little, refusing to outwardly acknowledge how the thought of the wolf witnessing a scene from his personal life made his insides squirm. He took one breath and emptied his mind of its' swirling emotion.

"There was no coercion involved." Dumbledore went on, "Quite the reverse, actually. Lily asked Severus..."

Minerva dropped her glass, "Lily did that?" she gasped. Minerva looked as if her world were crashing down around her, "I stood in for her mother at her wedding...She was so in love with
James...how could she be unfaithful?"

Poppy sighed and waved her wand, mending the glass and returning it to Minerva's hand.

Lupin moved to stand beside her, putting his hand on her shoulder, "She was never unfaithful to James. I don't think she would have taken the action she did, if she hadn't loved him with all her heart." Lupin told Minerva, gently.

Mrs. Weasley leaned forward, "So, Lily asked you to help her conceive?" she asked Severus in a soft voice.

"She said she was going to go to a Muggle clinic if I didn't help. Frankly, knowing Lily, she would have. They have created a method of artificially inseminating a woman whose husband has this problem." Severus fished around in his pocket for the Muggle brochure he'd procured.

Fertility Treatments and Sperm Donation

Glancing around at the confused, consternated faces, he multiplied it, so each could have one, and then he passed them around.

"I did fear that, if she sought Muggle help, her child would be a Squib." Severus went on, hearing his own voice take on the timbre of a classroom lecture, "We really don't know how magic is transmitted. The likelihood is that it is encoded in our genes, present in the gametes; that is to say, egg and sperm. However, magic is so unpredictable that it may not be preserved through the processes the Muggles use to prepare and preserve the sperm."

All eyes but Poppy's stared at him, blankly. He felt like he was in a Potion class full of first-years who hadn't done their reading. Sadly, he couldn't take points from or assign detentions to this group.

Minerva especially seemed to be struggling, "But, how could James have been infertile?" she asked shakily. She read the little pamphlet she held in her hands, "And, this donation business...Muggles do this commonly?"

"Not commonly, no." replied Severus, "It's expensive. And rather involved. But, when a woman wants a child, she's often willing to try anything." he thought it wise to not shock Minerva with all the techniques witches and Muggle women were know to try to get themselves with children.

"Did you and she go to a Muggle healer, then?" she waved the pamphlet about.

"No, Minerva." Severus said, calmly, "I had never heard of it before Lily told me of it. I'm still not convinced it would be possible to use it to conceive a wizard child. And it undoubtedly would have taken a few cycles to actually do the thing. Muggle healers have a success rate of about 25%, even using potions to force ovulation. Natural insemination has about an 80% success rate if the woman is ovulating."

"There must have been some better way to go about it, though, rather than sullying her marital vows? I still can't believe that Lily..." Minerva looked ready to weep.

"Oh yes," Severus ground out, "Because an assignation with a syringe and surgical tubing is so much more dignified." He stood again, swept past Dumbledore to glower out the window at the darkened grounds.

Dumbledore sighed, "Apparently it is not uncommon among the Pure Blood families. I have received something of an education this week." he said a little shamefacedly, "The healers I have spoken to just call it 'The Blight'" Dumbledore looked very gravely at Severus, "And I offer you my apologies for doubting you, Severus."
Severus inclined his head. Acknowledging, if not accepting, the apology.

"So, why did you never come forward as Harry's father before?" Arthur Weasley asked, finally speaking, "You could have done this, a long time ago." he didn't sound accusing, just curious.

Severus whirled, "Oh, yes, because as you yourselves have shown, the Wizarding World is so tolerant." he spat. He crossed his arms against his chest, "I would never have ruined Lily's good name."

"Severus." Dumbledore said, quietly, "You said you never liked Petunia, but you never offered objection to my placing Harry with her."

Severus was not going to let the old man lay that one at his door, "Because, if the qualifications for parenthood were revoked due to my dislikes, there would be no one in the whole of Britain who still had children." he replied darkly, "You assured me," he took a deep breath, "In fact, you assured the entire Wizarding World, that Petunia Dursley was delighted to take her sister's child."

Dumbledore closed his eyes, looking as defeated as Severus had ever seen him, "You are right, of course, Severus."

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken when Mrs. Weasley asked, "Professor Snape? Do I take it, you intend to retain custody of Harry?" Severus would have expected her tone to be much more hostile than it was.

"No, Mrs. Weasley." He replied, "I was hoping you and your husband would be willing. I thought perhaps we could do it quietly, before the start of the summer holidays." he looked at she and her husband.

They looked at each other. Mr. Weasley nodded at his wife, "Of course, we'd be happy to take Harry." she said, "But, perhaps, we need not make it legal. It may be that you and Harry...well, neither of you have any family..."

Severus just stared at the woman for a second, "I don't think so." he said, coldly, "A momentary exchange of bodily fluids does not create a parental bond. Nor should it."

"Severus." Dumbledore said, reprovingly.

Mrs. Weasley just smiled, "Not to worry, it's been a very difficult few weeks, for all of us. Of course we'll take Harry. Assuming Harry wants to come to us, of course."

Severus couldn't imagine Potter would have it any other way.
Out of Bounds

Chapter Summary

In which Harry gets some sleep and goes missing.

The second or third day she was back, McGonagall called Harry into her office. Harry had been shocked by how much weight she'd lost and the stark white stripe that now adorned her hair; things he'd noticed the first day she'd returned to teaching Transfiguration. The weight loss was much more obvious now as he stood in her office than when she was up in front of the classroom; her robes seemed to be wearing her. For the first time ever she seemed like a frail old woman.

She waved her wand and the door shut gently behind Harry. For a moment she just looked at him. He nervously stood, quelling the urge to rock from foot to foot.

She gestured to the straight backed, wooden chair in front of her desk, and he took it. She looked at him as though she'd never seen him before. "You wanted to see me, Professor?" he finally asked to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, Harry."

She must be worried about me, he thought, as she seldom called him by his first name.

Her voice was very quiet and gentle: "Professor Snape apprised the Headmaster and I of your...circumstances...with your relatives."

"Oh." Harry knew she had to be told, but that didn't make it any easier. He nodded, unwilling to trust his voice. He wasn't sure he could cope with the humiliation if she suddenly started treating him as though he were fragile.

"I know Mr. Longbottom's death must have been quite a shock, as it was to all of us. Augusta...Mrs. Longbottom...said he always spoke very highly of you and Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger." She stopped, her mouth trembling. "I- I wanted to tell you how sor..."

Harry cut her off. "It's fine, Professor," he said firmly, pleased that his voice didn't tremble. Normally, he would never ever have interrupted Professor McGonagall, but he was almost panicked by the idea she might apologize to him. It panicked him almost as much as talking about Neville did.

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Something must have shown on his face as a look of comprehension flitted across hers. "Did Professor Snape explain why he took custody of you?" she asked, changing the subject.

Harry nodded. "He said he was the only one available. I know you and Professor Dumbledore were busy."

She nodded. Harry thought she looked quite relieved now. He could hardly blame her. It must have been a real problem to figure out what to do with him, but it wasn't as though he wasn't accustomed to that. Every time the Dursleys went out, there had been a bit of a fuss to find someone to pass him off to if Mrs. Figg wasn't around.

"Quite right," she said after a moment. She had begun to regain her brisk manner, sounding much
"I know that you and Professor Snape have not always gotten along, but I trust he has been..." she paused, seeming to search for the right word, "all right?"

Harry nodded. Snape had been more than all right—for Snape. "He's been really decent, actually," Harry said honestly, wondering where this was going.

McGonagall relaxed minutely. "I want you to know you can come to me if you have any trouble, in future, Harry," she said, back to that soft, gentle voice.

Harry stopped himself from rolling his eyes. He was fond of the stern professor (though he'd never admit it to Ron, of course), but he'd never viewed her as a confidant. Especially since first year when she'd discounted Ron, Hermione, and himself telling her that someone was trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. All he said was: "Yes, Professor."

After that little interview, the teachers seemed content to leave him alone. Even Lupin had given up his campaign of trying to have a friendly chat with Harry. Snape seemed to keep a closer eye on him in class, but otherwise behaved almost normally.

The term settled into its usual round of homework and Quidditch practice. Harry slipped out every afternoon to feed Snuffles, although it was getting darker earlier. Harry made sure he got back in before dinner. He had the vague idea that he wasn't supposed to be out after dark, though he didn't ask anyone directly for fear of them forbidding him from going out at all. He couldn't venture out at lunchtime either—Snape had repeated to him, the day they'd bought his new things, that he would ban Harry from Quidditch if Harry missed a meal.

Snuffles, for his part, was rapidly becoming the best friend and confidant Harry had. Ron and Hermione were wrapped up in some drama over Ron's rat and Hermione's cat. Harry was also uneasy about speaking to them about what was going on in his head. He didn't want them to get the wrong idea and run to a teacher.

Snuffles didn't judge and was more affectionate than Hedwig. Harry supposed that dogs were just cuddlier. Many afternoons found Harry curled up under a tree with the giant dog, especially as the weather turned colder.

The bed Neville used to occupy was moved from the dorm, and after a few days, it didn't even seem strange that there were only four of them. It upset Harry how quickly Neville's absence became normal, though, as if they were somehow betraying his memory.

The teachers seemed to be recovering from their shock as well, although McGonagall's lessons seemed less difficult than last year and Snape, while not what one could call nice, lacked the harshness that had characterized his lessons before Neville's death. Dumbledore's eyes still followed Harry when he was in the Great Hall, but that was the only place Harry ever saw the headmaster.

It was hard for Harry to keep track of his studies though. Sometimes there didn't seem much point to finishing homework or turning up at practice. Some days, getting out of bed seemed like a Herculean effort. He was so tired all the time.

Part of that was very likely that Harry didn't sleep more than an hour or two at a time. Often he didn't know what his dreams had been about, he just woke feeling as though a dreadful weight was pressing down on him. Some dreams had him following someone—he was never sure who—but never quite catching up with them; they would be leaving a room just as he was entering it.
Occasionally, he had terribly vivid dreams of Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia that drove him out of his bed, to the relative safety of the common room, where he'd attempt to get an hour or two of sleep on one of the well worn couches before breakfast.

It was well into October when Hedwig dropped him a note during breakfast.

Mr. Potter,

Madam Pomfrey is expecting you this afternoon after class. She will check your weight and I have asked her to give you a quick exam to ascertain that your old injuries have healed properly.

Assuming you have gained sufficient weight, I think that it is reasonable to discontinue the appetite stimulant, but please do not miss any meals.

Professor Snape

Madam Pomfrey behaved fairly normally when Harry turned up in the hospital wing after classes that evening. Her manner toward him hadn't changed; she asked her questions in the same professional tone she'd always used. Harry relaxed, reassured by her no-nonsense demeanor.

In the weeks since Snape did his exam, Harry had gained almost a stone according to Madam Pomfrey. She smiled when she read the numbers. "Professor Snape's potion always seems to do the trick in these cases," she said.

Harry nodded, "So I can keep playing Quidditch?" he asked, a little anxiously.

The medi-witch sighed, "If you must."

"Now, be still for a moment more," she said, running her wand over him.

At least she hadn't asked him to undress. As it was, it was far too reminiscent of the exam that had started the whole thing.

"May I see your hand?" she asked suddenly.

"My hand?"

"The right one," she replied, glancing at a bit of parchment.

He held it out. He'd noticed that sometimes it ached when it rained and when he wrote long essays.

Madam Pomfrey directed her wand at it. A reddish glow surrounded Harry's knuckles. She made a low noise in her throat. "You've got some arthritis in these joints. Do they get swollen?"

Harry shrugged. "Sometimes...I guess. But, how can I have arthritis? I thought only old people got that."

"It's the type one gets from wear and tear. Those joints and bones were crushed. They healed, but not as well as they should have, so you have inflammation." She looked at him sharply. "Was it ever set?"

"Set?" asked Harry.

That seemed to be answer enough for her. She made another one of those irritated sounds. "The best I can do is vanish the bones and regrow them—properly this time."
Harry shuddered. "Do we have to do it tonight?" He'd had to regrow bones last year when Lockhart vanished his arm bones (now he sort of wished Lockhart had done his hand too), and it was a very unpleasant thing.

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "No, not tonight. I'd like you to have some time in the morning to sleep, so it's best we do it on a Friday or Saturday evening." She waved her wand and summoned a large book, which thumped itself open on the table beside her. She leafed through pages marked October. "Yes, next Saturday will be fine. Come up after your dinner. You'll likely want to bring something to read."

Harry nodded. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey." He glanced out the window; it was still light enough that he could go feed Snuffles, if she let him go now. "Can I go, Madam? I-er-had some extra homework I wanted to get to."

"Hmm?" she asked absently as she wrote something on a bit of parchment. "Oh, yes, of course, dear."

Harry didn't need telling twice. He hurried down to the grounds where the sun was still a little above the horizon.

"Hey, boy," he said to Snuffles who was waiting patiently by "their" rock.

The dog wagged his tail and nuzzled to be pet. Harry pulled out the sausages he'd taken from the table at breakfast, feeding them one by one to the dog. Harry was pleased to see that the dog had put on some weight, too.

The afternoon was fine, with the October sunset making the red, orange, and yellow leaves left on the trees flare beautifully. Harry sat down against the sun warmed rock, wrapping his cloak securely around him. This was a much better one than his old cloak; Snape had insisted on this particular one at the shop, complaining that his old cloak was an invitation to hypothermia. Snape was a puzzle that Harry still couldn't get his head around.

The big black dog lay with his head on Harry's outstretched legs. Harry rested his hand on the dog, thinking that he needed to go back soon. But it was nice to sit here for a few minutes.

It was full dark the next time Harry opened his eyes. He wasn't sure what had woken him, and all he wanted to do was drop back off, but his bed seemed awfully hard for some reason. It took him a moment figure out where he was. He could see the almost-full moon on the horizon. Snuffles was gone and Harry could hear the wind through the trees of the Forbidden Forest. Oh, Merlin, what time was it?

Harry scrambled to his feet, cold and stiff. He fumbled in his pocket for his wand, lighting it so he could see his watch; it was past midnight.

McGonagall was going to go mad. She'd been most adamant since her return that students be in the common room by curfew. And Snape was likely to make good on his threat to ban Harry from Quidditch. God only knew what else he might do; for all that he swore he wasn't going to raise a hand to Harry.

Perhaps no one had noticed he was gone. As if that was bloody likely.

Harry sighed; there was nothing for it. He shook the leaves off his cloak, stretched, and headed back to the castle entrance, hoping Filch had forgotten to lock the doors tonight. He doubted he'd be so lucky.
Halfway back, as Harry passed the greenhouses, he saw the end of someone's lit wand. He really hoped they weren't looking for him.

"Potter!" hissed Snape's angry voice out of the darkness.

Harry froze, his stomach feeling as though it had shattered into pieces.

"Where the devil have you been, boy?" the tall man demanded, closing the distance between them in three long strides.

Instinctively, Harry threw up his hand to protect his face. This was far too much like Uncle Vernon in one of his rages. "Please, I just fell asleep and..."

"You fell asleep?" Snape grabbed Harry's shoulder, his eyes sweeping up and down to check Harry over as though he were looking for injuries. "Are you mad? I was just about to ask the Aurors to look for you." Snape's black eyes were furious. He gave Harry a little shake. "What the hell were you..."

Harry never got to hear what Snape's question was. A black furry mass jumped past Harry and tore Snape's hand from Harry's shoulder. Snape's wand light appeared on the ground as Snuffles slammed the adult wizard's body down with a dull thud.

Harry hastily lit his own wand. Snuffles had one paw on Snape's chest and one paw on the man's wand hand. Snape was struggling and cursing, holding the great dog's jaw away from his throat with his free hand.

"Snuffles!" cried Harry. "Stop! Off! Down!" Oh, he was going to be in so much trouble! Harry grabbed the animal around the neck and frantically tried to pull him off of the professor. "Snuffles! Off!"

"Potter! What the hell are you doing? Get away before the damned thing eats you!" shouted Snape, trying to wrestle his wand arm out from underneath the dog's paw.

"Snuffles! No! Bad dog!" Harry shouted in the dog's ear as he tried, fruitlessly, to drag the dog away from his guardian. "Bloody dog! You're making it worse!"

The dog backed off with a sudden whine. He turned to Harry, gave him a lick on the cheek, then turned to growl again at Snape who lay still on the ground, breathing hard.

Snape asked in his deadliest voice: "Do you know this animal?" Slowly, he moved to stand up, taking care to keep his wand between himself and the dog.

Snuffles kept his body between Harry and Snape, his hackles up, growling low in his throat.

Harry tried to haul him back a bit, with his arms still around the dog's neck. "Yes, sir," he said breathlessly. "He's never acted like this before. I think he must be someone's familiar." Harry suddenly had a horrified memory of hearing a news story of a dog that had to be put down for attacking someone. At the time he'd wished that would happen to Marge's dog Ripper, but no one cared if a dog attacked someone like him. No one would care about a dog attacking Harry, but a dog attacking Snape ...

"Please, sir," said Harry, not even caring about the begging tone of voice or the fact that tears had started to spill down his cheeks. It was dark, and anyway, Harry couldn't see how he could get into much worse trouble with Snape. "I've been feeding him and I guess he's gotten fond of me or something. He probably thought he was helping me. I know he's probably a wizard's familiar. We
can find out who's and send him back there. He just...he didn't know who you were. He's not
dangerous...we can take him to Hagrid's. Please, please...don't…” Harry wasn't even sure what he
was asking for.

"Potter, calm down," said the potion's master in a strange, almost gentle, voice. "I won't hurt the
dog."

Harry wanted to ask the man to promise, but quelled the childish impulse. Harry knew how much
weight promises made to him carried. "Yes, sir," he said dully.

The dog stopped growling and leaned into Harry's leg, pushing his head into Harry's hand.

"Clearly the dog is someone's familiar," said Snape slowly, looking very thoughtful in the wand
light. So quickly Harry didn't have time to blink, Snape pointed his wand and said: "Abduco Canis."

A collar and lead appeared on Snuffles.

"Do you think you can manage to walk that monster up to the castle?" Snape asked coldly. "Or
should I stun it?"

Harry picked up the lead, hoping he wasn't leading Snuffles to an execution. "No, sir. I have him,"
he said meekly.
Harry faces the consequences of his actions.

If Severus had known the boy had missed dinner, he would have hunted him down and demanded an explanation, at least. However, Severus himself had not been in the Great Hall. He had taken dinner in his quarters in order to catch up on the damnable amount of work that had gone by the wayside while he was attending to the various other distractions this term had. He was late going over his seventh year’s research proposals and wanted to hand them back, preferably before the students died of old age.

Consequently, it was not until Minerva appeared at his door, a few minutes after curfew, that he discovered the boy was missing.

A knock at his door at this time of night was never a good sign. He steeled himself before opening the door.

Minerva stood there, a frown on her face. She was still dressed, but her hair hung down her back in a long plait, as if she’d been interrupted in the act of preparing for bed. “Severus, I’m sorry to bother you this time of night, but I wonder if you’ve seen Harry?”

“Not since potion’s class,” replied Severus coolly. “Have you checked the hospital wing? Poppy was supposed to have seen the boy this afternoon. Perhaps she kept him.” It was unlikely that Poppy would have done so, without at least informing Minerva, but Severus knew she was just as overwhelmed with catch-up work as the rest of them.

“I’ve already spoken to her. She sent him away before dinner and no one has seen him since.”

Severus’ jaw clenched. “Have you spoken to his friends?.”

Minerva nodded, looking a little helpless. “I was hoping, perhaps, he was serving a late detention with you.”

“No,” said Severus slowly. “But he may find himself serving a great many from now on,” he added darkly. His stomach knotted. Damn the boy. “What did Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger say?”

“They haven’t seen him since class ended. In fact, it was Miss Granger who came to tell me Harry was missing.”

“Do you mean to tell me that Potter’s been missing for almost six hours?” Severus asked in a low voice.

Minerva nodded, her lips pressed into a worried line.

Severus took a long breath in. “And no one thought to inform me of this?” he demanded harshly. He had been the boy’s guardian for less than six weeks and already the infernal child had gone missing. “Are you simply trying to hand him over to Black? Do you want another death on your conscience?” He didn’t trouble to keep his voice down.
Minerva’s face whitened with equal parts fury and pain. “I only just found out myself,” she snapped. “I dined with the headmaster.” Her hand tightened on her wand.

So much for his plans of a quiet evening catching up with work. “I wish to speak with Granger and Weasley,” Severus growled, stalking out of his door and down the corridor.

Minerva caught up with his long strides. “They’re waiting in the headmaster’s office.”

At least the old cat had done that much right.

Very shortly, they stood again in the headmaster’s office. Present for this meeting was Granger, the Weasley twins, Ron Weasley and the youngest Weasley. Dumbledore’s idea no doubt. The presence of the twins made sense; Severus had long suspected they had a great deal of uncommon knowledge about the castle. And the Weasley girl had some idea of the tunnels under the school, owing to her activities last year while possessed by the Dark Lord.

Severus sincerely hoped they didn’t have to recover the boy’s body from one of those tunnels. One horrible scenario after another flashed through his mind. Lily’s eyes looking from Potter’s face, as cold and dead as Longbottom’s eyes had been, floated to the surface of Severus’ unpleasant speculations.

Anxiety simmered in his stomach; it would not take much for it to boil into panic. Severus took a few seconds to, very deliberately, clear his mind of emotion. Panic would serve no one.

“No have you thought of anywhere else Mr. Potter might have gone?” Dumbledore was asking the children.

“I’ve seen him on the astronomy tower,” Miss Weasley told Dumbledore, very quietly.

“What the devil were you doing there?” demanded Severus.

Miss Weasley jumped. “I—I just go up there for a bit of quiet sometimes,” she said, her voice somewhere between frightened and terrified.

“Where else do you suggest we look?” asked Minerva.

Granger and the Weasleys glanced at each other guiltily until Severus snapped, “Out with it, then.”

“Harry’s been sort of... disappearing... in the afternoons, after class,” ventured Granger quietly.

“Yeah,” said one of the Weasley twins. “He’s late to Quidditch practice a lot.”

“Do you know where he goes?” Dumbledore asked gently.

All of them shook their heads. “Wherever he goes, it’s out on the grounds. Across the lake. I’ve seen him coming back by the green houses,” said Granger. “We thought maybe he was going down to Hagrid’s, but when we asked, Hagrid says he hasn’t seen Harry out there.”

“He’s been a bit funny since...” the youngest Weasley boy trailed off, looking at Severus. He seemed to lose his nerve. “Well, since the whole thing with Neville.” He dropped his eyes to the floor. “But we all reckoned that everyone’s pretty messed up about it.”

Miss Weasley gave a little sob. Severus fished around in his pocket for a clean handkerchief. As the students in his house soon found out, he loathed sniveling students wiping their noses on their sleeves. He held it out in front of her. She looked at it as if it might bite her, but took it after a
“You would say Mr. Potter’s been behaving oddly, then?” asked Severus.

All the children nodded. Severus looked up to catch the headmaster and McGonagall exchanging an uncomfortable glance. They’d all known that Potter and several other of the students were behaving oddly, but were at a bit of a loss to know what to do about it. Mr. Weasley’s assessment of everyone being “pretty messed up” was quite correct. Poppy had asked Severus to brew an extra batch of calming draft because so many children were coming to her with nightmares.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” asked Dumbledore of the children in his best grandfatherly manner.

They all shook their heads.

Dumbledore nodded. “Off to bed, then. We’ll come find you if anything changes.”

Severus doubted the children would actually make it to their beds, but at least they’d be out from underfoot. They trooped down the stairs.

“I’ll go check the tower, shall I?” Minerva said when the students had gone and they’d heard the door close at the bottom of the stairs.

Dumbledore nodded. “I have asked some of the ghosts to check the majority of the castle. I’d rather keep this quiet.” He paused. “I wonder if you wouldn’t mind checking the grounds yourself, Severus?”

Severus nodded in agreement. “Have you checked to see whether Potter’s damned cloak is gone, as well?” he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. “I asked the house elves to have a look. It’s still in his trunk.”

It might be less worrying if the cloak was gone; at least they would know Potter had disappeared of his own volition.

Which reminded him, if Potter was still alive at the end of this evening, Severus was going to confiscate that bloody thing until Potter was no longer his responsibility. After a moment of thought, Severus said, “If the boy is not found in the next hour, I will, of course, bring in the aurors.”

Dumbledore sighed with resignation. “That is your prerogative.”

“Send a Patronus if someone finds him,” Severus said over his shoulder as he strode from the room.

The evening was cold and Severus hoped Potter had taken his new cloak. It had a warming charm and an impervious charm, so even if Potter was unconscious, he wouldn’t be vulnerable to dying of hypothermia. Assuming Black didn’t just kill the boy outright.

By the time Severus reached the greenhouses, he had been over almost every grim outcome possible. Potter dead, Potter gravely injured and dying, Potter gravely injured and living, Potter cruciated into madness, Potter kidnapped and used in some dark rite to resurrect the Dark Lord...

Severus felt sick.

He lit his wand as brightly as it would light, and then, on reflection, incanted a spell to make blood droplets fluoresce in the light (a little spell he’d invented, after getting the idea from a television
A movement ahead of him. The almost full moon silhouetting a slight, cloaked messy-haired figure.

"Potter!" Severus gasped. "Where the devil have you been, boy?" He quickened his pace and closed in on the child. In the darkness, Severus couldn’t see if the child was injured.

Potter threw a hand up between them. He fell back a step, as though Severus was threatening to slap him. "Please, I just fell asleep and..."

"You fell asleep?" Severus grabbed Potter’s shoulder. Potter did indeed look unmarked. Like a catalyst that caused a potion to turn it from base to acid, relief turned all of Severus’ fear to righteous anger, "Are you mad? I was just about to ask the Aurors to look for you." He shook the boy’s shoulder. "What the hell were you..."

Severus never finished. Something huge slammed into him, throwing him to the ground. An animal was at his throat, one paw on his wand hand, one on his chest, like something out of his nightmares. The nightmares he’d lived through since James Potter had saved his life, that long-ago night.

He got his free hand onto the beast’s jaw, keeping it from him. Desperately, he hoped the boy would have enough sense to run for the castle. Clearly too much to hope for; the boy had grabbed the great brute around the neck and was yelling nonsensically at it.

"Potter! What the hell are you doing? Get away before the damned thing eats you!" shouted Severus, fighting like a mad thing.

"Snuffles! No! Bad dog!"

Severus could hear the boy’s words now.

"Bloody dog! You're making it worse!"

The dog backed off with a sudden whine. Severus saw it turn to the boy—give him a lick on the cheek—then turn to growl again at Severus.

Not moving at all, Severus asked, "Do you know this animal?" He chanced a looked at the pair; they were standing closely together, in mutual defense. Judging it safe enough, he slowly stood up, keeping his wand on the creature.

The boy, his arms still around the dog’s neck, said, "Yes, sir. He's never acted like this before. I think he must be someone's familiar. Please, sir..." Suddenly the boy sounded stricken and tears washed down his cheeks, shining in the wand light. "I've been feeding him and I guess he's gotten fond of me or something. He probably thought he was helping me. I know he's probably a wizard's familiar. We can find out whose and send him back there. He just... he didn't know who you were. He's not dangerous... we can take him to Hagrid's. Please, please... don't..." The boy broke off.

Oh, Lily, thought Severus, he’s so like you. Through this whole horrible term, nothing moved the child to tears, until he feared for an animal who’d obviously chosen this boy as his wizard.

It was not at all unusual for a familiar to attack when they thought their wizard was in danger, but the child probably assumed that the dog would be treated as vicious.

"Potter, calm down," Severus said softly, trying to calm both child and dog. They were both shivering, with fear or cold Severus couldn’t tell. "I won't hurt the dog."
"Yes, sir," Potter replied hopelessly.

The dog stopped growling, at last.

"Clearly the dog is someone's familiar," said Severus dryly, pointing his wand to conjure a lead for the dog. There was no need to give Mrs. Norris a heart attack. "Abduco Canis."

"Do you think you can manage to walk that monster up to the castle or should I stun it?" asked Severus.

Potter picked up the lead. "No, sir. I have him," he said meekly.

"Come along, then." Severus sighed. He wasn’t angry anymore, just deeply, deeply tired.

That made something occur to him. “Why are you sleeping outside, Potter?” he asked as they walked.

“I didn’t mean to,” Potter replied defensively. “I just came out to...” he trailed off.

“To..?” prompted Severus implacably, steeling himself for the answer.

“To feed Snuffles,” muttered the boy, sounding ashamed.

“Is this where you’ve been sneaking off to every afternoon?” Now Severus remembered the times he’d noted Potter slipping food into a plastic bag. He’d wondered about that, but so much else had been going on that he’d forgotten.

The boy nodded. “I didn’t think anyone noticed,” he admitted quietly. “And I wanted to make sure Snuffles had food.”

“That’s what you’re calling that monster?” snorted Severus, another wave of relief washing over him. He’d pictured any number of illicit, unhealthy, or even possibly lethal activities. “You spend too much time with Hagrid.” The alternating relief and adrenaline had him feeling a little punch drunk.

The boy looked at Severus with such an expression of surprise that Severus fought down another snort of laughter.

“Oh, bugger,” muttered Severus, realizing he hadn’t informed the headmaster that he’d found the boy alive and undamaged. Quickly, he conjured his Patronus and sent it off ahead of them.

They walked on in silence for a moment. “You haven’t answered my question,” said Severus.

“I just haven’t been sleeping well, and I guess I was more tired than I thought. I just sat down for a moment and...”

“How long haven’t you been sleeping well?” asked Severus, suddenly sharp again. He wondered that he hadn’t thought to ask before. It would explain some things about what he’d observed about the boy.

“Er– since... well, for a while,” the boy admitted.

Yes, that said a lot about his behavior and performance.

They were at the castle now. With every step both the dog and the boy appeared to become more ill at ease. The dog’s tail was between his legs. Severus presumed it was only the bond between familiar and wizard that kept the animal from bolting.
Potter seemed to be holding his breath, waiting for the axe to fall. He looked equally ready to bolt and kept putting his hand in the dog’s fur.

They didn’t speak any more until they were at Dumbledore’s office door. The dog balked at first at the moving steps but, at a word from the boy, calmed enough to get on them.

Minerva and Dumbledore were the only ones there.

“Harry!” Dumbledore greeted the boy with relief and pleasure.

“Sir,” muttered the boy. “I’m sorry I got everyone upset.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m at all pleased, Harry,” said Minerva stiffly. “And... what’s this?” She indicated the giant dog that was now cowering behind the boy.

“The boy’s acquired a familiar, apparently,” said Severus. “That’s where he’s been going every afternoon.”

“Why didn’t you say something, Harry?” said Dumbledore gently. “We can certainly accommodate a pet. Even,” the headmaster’s eyes twinkled, “the occasional huge pet. And I’m certain Hagrid will be happy to help.”

The boy just shrugged, looking at the floor.

Severus was losing patience again. No one seemed interested in explaining to the boy just how much turmoil he’d caused.

Fortunately, Severus no longer had to put up with Dumbledore’s version of discipline where Potter was concerned.

“I agree that the dog should stay with the boy,” said Severus, taking a deep calming breath. “But we still need to discuss the matter of missed meals, wandering in far after curfew, and causing the three of us to nearly turn the castle upside down.”

Potter’s back stiffened.

Minerva sighed. “Twenty points from Gryffindor, then.” Her punishments had been light since she’d gotten back, but that was fine with Severus; he didn’t need to put up with her either.

“I have discussed with Potter that missing meals would result in a ban from Quidditch,” Severus said coldly, addressing Potter alone. He was not going to give Dumbledore the idea that he had any influence here. The boy’s hands went into his pockets and he scowled, but tellingly, he didn’t argue. Not even with the headmaster and Minerva present. “So, for the next week then, for the missed meal, no Quidditch.”

Potter glanced up at Severus in surprise. Perhaps he thought the punishment too harsh, but Severus was damned if he was going to let Potter off easy from this.

Severus paused significantly. “I also want you to stop wandering about the grounds alone. I realize that it seems safe enough, but Black was able to escape Azkaban when no one believed that possible. Given that, I’m surprised we haven’t discussed this before.”


Minerva looked upset, Dumbledore guilty.
“You didn’t tell him?” asked Severus astonished.

“Tell me what?” asked Potter.

“Severus,” started Dumbledore. “We felt that...”

Severus couldn’t contain himself. “Are you out of your mind?” he sputtered, not caring that Potter was standing right there.

“Tell me what?” demanded Potter more loudly.

Severus rubbed his hand over his face in exasperation. He reminded himself that he would never win a duel with Dumbledore. He reminded himself that he still needed his job.

He dropped his hand. He turned to Potter to look at him squarely “There is a convicted murderer after you, Potter. The Dark Lord’s right hand man. He escaped from prison this summer. No one knows how. This is why the Ministry was watching your house this summer and why they were so concerned that you return to your aunt’s home. There are–were–powerful wards that protect you there.”

Potter’s face grew paler with each sentence, but he never said a word.

“That’s why we have Dementors guarding the school,” finished Severus. “And why I bloody well assumed we were going to find your remains this evening!” The last was shouted at the boy.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said reprovingly.

“Get to bed, Potter,” said Severus sternly. “Take your dog, and for the next week, when not at class, don’t even think of leaving your common room, save for meals. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” The boy nodded quickly. After a moment, he asked, “Erm, what about...? he indicated the dog.

Severus rolled his eyes, it was late and he wasn’t thinking, “Fine,” he growled, irritated that it would take some of the impact out of the penalty, but not seeing a way around it, “Make sure the damned dog is cared for, but in daylight and no detours. If I hear any different, you’ll be spending that time with me,” Severus growled. He wondered if perhaps he should get the house elves to do it instead, but he’d deal with that in the morning.

The boy nodded again.

“Go on, then.” Severus snapped, “Get out.”

The boy didn’t even wait to be dismissed by the headmaster. He and the dog scrambled out of the room.

Severus turned back to the adults.

“That is not how I would have wanted Harry to find out,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Then you should have told him yourself,” snarled Severus. “The boy has no sense of self preservation. He never simply does what he is told.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I had hoped to spare him the anxiety.”

“Spare yourself, you mean.” This was, unexpectedly, from Minerva. “Albus, we have discussed this
before. You can’t protect people by keeping things secret.” She sounded weary, as if this were an old argument.

“It is late,” said Dumbledore. “None of us are thinking clearly. Perhaps it would be better to take this up in the morning.”

Severus nodded. He planned to take a great many things up with Dumbledore in the morning.
In which Harry brings home his familiar and receives a gift.

When Snape dismissed him, Harry didn't even spare a glance for Dumbledore. Perhaps he should have, but he'd seen that expression on Snape's face before. He had no interest in witnessing what looked like a major Snape tantrum. No doubt, if he stayed, he'd soon be on the receiving end of it.

As it was, Harry couldn't believe his luck. He paused, at the bottom of the stairs, to lean against the wall, marveling that his hide was still intact. Snuffles seemed to feel the same way. The dog was so excited, he ran in little circles beside Harry, chasing his tale, threatening to tangle himself up in the lead (although it seemed to be charmed against that). It was almost as if Snuffles felt he'd just dodged a bullet as well. Harry grinned at his own slightly hysterical imaginings.

Harry knew the dog was just picking up on what Harry was feeling. Marge used to say that dogs understood and generally shared their owner's emotions. He supposed she must be right; her dogs all disliked him, as much as she did. Come to think of it, it was likely that it was more so, in wizards. Wizard's pets were much more in tune with their owners than Muggle's pets were. Hermione's cat seemed to understand every word they said and Hedwig was smart enough to always know where to deliver Harry's letters.

Snape was just getting more confusing. When Snape had grabbed Harry, he'd given him a shake, true, but not like Uncle Vernon. When Vernon shook Harry, it made his teeth rattle and left bruises, more often than not. This was more like Snape was reassuring himself that Harry was real.

Unbidden, the telling-off Mrs. Weasley gave Fred, George and Ron the night they'd come to rescue Harry from the Dursley's came back to him. She had had that exact tone of voice. Harry snorted, choking back a laugh, at the absurdity of comparing Mrs. Weasley to Snape.

To be honest, Harry had assumed Snape would just kill the Snuffles out of hand. He'd assumed the man had raised his wand to do just that. In front of the headmaster, Snape acted as though Snuffles attacking him wasn't any big deal, letting Harry go so far as to keep the dog.

Harry wouldn't have even asked Dumbledore if he could keep the him, let alone Snape. The great shaggy thing was like a young pony. Much bigger than most of the other student's pets and bound to be correspondingly more of a problem. The largest pets people usually kept were cats or owls.

Harry wondered if he could trust the dog to find his own way out of the castle the way the owls and cats seemed to, or if he should take him on walks himself. Best do it himself, especially if that was the only way he was going to be allowed out of the common room for the next week. Food always seemed to find its way up to the dormitory for people's cats, so Harry guessed it would for Snuffles as well.

Harry hoped the Weasleys wouldn't mind if he brought the dog with him for the summer, if he went to stay there. If not, perhaps he could ask Hagrid to look after him.

"You're going to be a headache, you know." Harry told the dog, fondly. He patted him on the head,
"Come on, then. Let's get upstairs."

The dog walked docilely enough beside Harry, as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. Fortunately, Mrs. Norris was nowhere to be seen.

What Snape had said about this Black person was worrying. Harry remembered someone on the television talking about someone by the name of Black escaping from a high security prison this summer, Uncle Vernon and Aunt Marge had talked about it at length. But it wouldn't be a wizard on the Muggle news, would it?

Snape, McGonagall and even Dumbledore seemed rattled by the idea. That wasn't good. But, somehow, Harry couldn't find it in him to get worked up about it. It was just one more thing.

"It's not like I haven't had the last two years to get used to the idea that a crazed killer wants me dead." Harry muttered to Snuffles, "Black can't be worse than Voldemort." If Black was so dangerous, Harry had to agree with Snape, it was better that he know.

The dog nosed his head into Harry's hand, comfortingly.

"If you go after Black the way you went after Snape, maybe I shouldn't worry." Harry said, "I wonder if somebody trained you to do that?" The way the dog had pinned Snape's wand hand would be the best way for the animal to take down a wizard.

The common room was empty and quiet when Harry got back. Two lamps glowing on tables and the fire were the only light. Harry unclipped the lead from the dog's collar and tucked it into the pocket of his robe.

The dog eagerly sniffed around the room, exploring. "If you make a mess in here," warned Harry, "My housemates will kill us both."

On one of the study tables lit by a lamp was a tray. A folded note, and a small plate with a sandwich was on top of it. Harry picked up the note, while looking to see what was in the sandwich. He wondered if, maybe, Hermione had left it for him. Ron might have thought of it, but he would have gotten hungry and eaten it halfway through.

Mr. Potter,

I will not have you missing meals and making yourself ill.

Do not share your sandwich with the dog. His dinner is under the table.

Professor Snape

Harry just shook his head, feeling like he wanted to laugh again. A dish of food did, indeed, sit under the table for the Snuffles.

"Come on, boy." Harry called softly, "Looks like we have dinner ready." He pulled a chair up, "Do you know I used to get into trouble at the Dursleys for eating too much?" he said to the dog, who was tucking into his bowl of kibble, "It's true." Harry said, as if the dog had made a sound of incredulity, "They always said I was too expensive to feed. Now I've got Snape going mad, if I so much as miss dinner. How strange is that?"

He wondered now if Ron and Hermione even realized he was gone. They'd noticed he'd not been around in the afternoon and asked him a few times where he was disappearing to, but hadn't pressed him too hard. He regretted the distance that had been growing between them, but he didn't know
what to do about it. It wasn't that he was still angry with them, it was just that it felt like he was a million miles away from them; it was so much effort to reach out.

Just one more thing.

It was very late, but Harry had slept for hours and really wasn't that tired. When he finished his sandwich, he sat down in one of the good chairs by the fire and Snuffles made himself at home between Harry's chair and the fire, curling up with a sigh.

Broodingly, Harry stared into the fire, still surprised at how lightly he'd gotten off. Twenty points and a week without Quidditch for breaking curfew and missing a meal might seem a lot to the other students. The usual penalty for missing curfew was detention-Quidditch bans were generally saved for the most serious of infractions- and no one had ever cared about anyone missing meals before. However, Snape meant what he said about this meal business, Harry supposed and Harry had heard how distressed the teachers had been about him going missing. Given all of that, it could have been a lot worse.

Harry knew that Oliver would have a fit when he heard of this Quidditch ban of course, but there was no game scheduled for the week, so Harry would only be missing practice.

As far as Harry was concerned, Oliver could have his fit; Harry was grateful that it was merely a week. Knowing Snape, Harry had been having visions of a ban for the whole term or the whole year. Hell, the next five years.

It occurred to Harry then: what were Snape and McGonagall going to tell people about why he couldn't play? Snape wasn't likely to say that he was Harry's guardian and had meted out the punishment for the offense of Harry missing meals. Were they going to just make something up? Snape would certainly enjoy just hinting darkly at catching Harry in the midst of some shameful, vaguely humiliating, illicit act.

Lovely.

Harry heard the portrait hole open and shut. He turned around expecting, this time of night, to see Fred and George. Maybe Lee Jordan. Instead it was Ginny.

She was breathing hard and her cheeks were pink. She was in a blue dressing gown and slippers, with her hair in a ponytail. "Oh," she said, "I thought everyone was in bed." She fumbled with tucking her wand into the pocket of her dressing gown.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"Er, hungry." she said quickly, "Went down to the kitchens." Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms over her chest, "Anyway, where've you been?" she asked irritably. " Everyone was looking for you. And then, McGonagall told us a while ago, that they found you, and sent everyone to bed."

"Fell asleep and missed curfew." Harry mumbled, embarrassed, "Sorry. I didn't mean to upset everyone." It wasn't enough that the teachers had all been looking for him, apparently everyone in his house had been, as well.

Ginny nodded, her face relaxing, "It's all right. It really wasn't everyone. Hermione just got all worried when you weren't back, she went and told McGonagall. Ron and I told her that you were fine, but you know how she is."

Harry nodded, not sure whether to be pleased or annoyed by this. It was nice that she worried, but it sounded like Hermione's worrying had gotten him in trouble again.
On the other hand, it hadn't been that much trouble, and now he got to keep Snuffles in the dorms.

Ginny stood there, fidgeting a bit. He thought she was going to ask about what Snape had said or maybe say something about Snuffles, but the dog was half under Harry's chair, in the shadows. Perhaps, Ginny hadn't noticed him. "Harry...?" she said after a long uneasy silence, "I have something for you. Would you wait there?"

"If you like." said Harry, wondering what it could be. Ginny hadn't said two words to him in days. But then, she'd always been a bit shy around him.

She pattered up the stairs and came back down again very quickly, "I wanted you to have this. Fred and George gave it to me, when they first came to Hogwarts. I was really upset they were leaving, they thought it would cheer me up." She held out her hand. Harry put out his own and she laid a snitch there, "It's a good one. They always used to use it, when they played at home." she smiled, a little sadly, "They never let me play with them. Said I was too little."

Harry wasn't sure what to say, "Ginny, thanks, but why..?"

"I never got to thank you, for what you did last year." Ginny smiled up at him, looking happier than she had since the year began. And yet, for just a second, something about her face looked strange, as if something were terribly wrong. Harry decided he must be over tired. When he looked again, she looked fine. She went on quietly, "I want you to know, it was very brave, what you did. And I'm really glad you got rid of Riddle. Whatever happens, I want you to know that."

Harry nodded, completely non-plussed, "Are you all right, Ginny?" he asked.

"Of course I am." she said lightly, "I just...I didn't like to talk about this in front of anyone else. That's all." She closed his hand over the snitch, patted the back of his fingers before withdrawing her hand "You don't need to worry about me" she said reassuringly

"Okay" said Harry, although her words had the opposite effect on him. He resolved to mention it to Ron in the morning, at least.

"Good night, Harry." she said. She gave him that same vaguely wrong, enigmatic smile and walked back up the stairs to her dormitory.
This is a potentially upsetting/triggering chapter. Hard to write. Likely, hard to read. Pretty dark stuff. I swear, on the soul of my muse, it ends on a hopeful note.

Triggering for suicidal imagery.

There are more than just references to child abuse and suicide. Please, remember that this is rated 16+ and read accordingly.

“He’s so sweet!” Hermione gushed, as she scratched an appreciative Snuffles’s ears, “So this is where you been going? To feed him? Why didn’t you say? He’s such a handsome boy.” She sat on the settee, with Snuffles’s sitting beside her. The dog was looking positively smug with the attention

Harry smiled, uncertainly and shook his head. He’d never quite pictured Hermione as a dog person before. She certainly didn’t like Fang this much. However, that might have had something to do with the fact that Snuffles wasn’t drooling all over her robes.

“I don’t know.” Harry said quietly, looking at his hands as they rested in his lap. He hesitated, then said in a rush, “Listen, I’m sorry I haven’t been...well...I’ve been a bit...Anyway, I’m sorry. It’s just that so much has been going on. And well... I guess I was afraid the whole lot of us would scare him off.” Harry knew that he hadn’t been treating his friends very well, lately. He hoped they’d accept his apology, awkward as it was.

That morning, Ron had been right on Hermione’s heels looking for him, and Harry knew he hated getting up early. She’d been up looking for Harry at the crack of dawn and found he and Snuffles curled up on one of the common room settees. She’d shaken Harry awake and demanded to know where he had been until well past curfew. Snuffles had interrupted her interrogation by raising his head and yawning, and then turning to regard them, his mouth open in a great, panting doggy grin.

Harry had explained to Hermione and Ron (who was still in his dressing gown) how he’d fallen asleep outside after feeding Snuffles. How Snape had found him and dragged them both to the headmaster’s office.

“Don’t worry about it.” said Ron bracingly, “You’ve had a lot on your plate.” Ron reached over to pat the dog’s head too. “He doesn’t look like he’s scared of anything, now.” Ron smiled, “I can’t believe Snape said you could keep him. Did he really attack Snape?”

“Yeah, I thought he was going to tear Snape apart.” Harry said, “And then Snape said something about him being my familiar, and we brought him up to the castle. I don’t get it.”

“Well, familiars are a bit like wands, aren’t they?” said Hermione, thoughtfully.

“Er. They are?” asked Ron, mystified.

Hermione gave her familiar eye roll, “They choose the wizard. Even if Snape said to send the dog away, it would probably find a way back. Most of our pets are like us, in their own species. They’re the wizards of their kind.” She looked impatiently at their blank expressions, “Or did you think any
old owl could do something like deliver our mail?"

“I never thought about it.” shrugged Ron.

Hermione sighed, “There’re all kinds of laws in the Muggle world against keeping exotic animals and you have to get cats and dogs all sorts of vaccinations and have them neutered and things like that. But, magical pets are like us and don’t need all that.”

Ron was looking hard at Hermione, “What’s neutered?”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Hermione’s cheeks went bright pink, “You explain.” she said, seemingly caught between amusement and embarrassment.

“Later.” said Harry. He’d forgotten to tell them the most important part, “After he said that I could keep the dog, Snape said that I couldn’t wander the grounds by myself anymore, because someone called Sirius Black is after me.”

Ron went pale, “You what?” he whispered, sounding uncharacteristically shocked.

“So, you know who he is?” Harry asked in exasperation, as Hermione had put her hands over her mouth in fear.

“He...he was You-Know-Who’s right hand man.” Ron replied, “He killed thirteen Muggles right after...” Ron sort of vaguely indicated Harry’s forehead, “He blew up a whole street, my dad told me. They say he’s mad. He’s been in Azkaban for twelve years. He escaped last summer. It was big news until...” Ron looked down, uncomfortably, “Until Neville.” Ron looked up again, “Don’t you remember? Dumbledore said about it the first day we were back. That’s why the Dementors are here. I know The Daily Prophet hasn’t had anything but the Longbottom trial in it for weeks, I suppose it’s because there haven’t been any Black sightings, but he’s still out there.”

Snuffles whined and gently pulled on Harry’s sleeve with his teeth, “Shh, Snuffles.” Harry said to the dog absently.

He remembered vaguely that Dumbledore had said something, but Harry hadn’t really been in any shape to listen to the welcoming speech that day, and since Neville...

Harry’s thoughts were interrupted by Oliver banging in through the portrait hole, a slip of parchment in his hand.

“Harry!” cried Oliver, waving the parchment around, “What the hell is this about you being on the injured list for the next week?”

“What?” said Harry, confused.

“Madam Pomfrey just sent me a note to put you on the injured list for the next week!” Oliver walked over to them and paced up and down in frustration, “So I’m going to lose a whole week’s worth of practice with our Seeker because you have managed to mangle your hand somehow!”

Harry didn’t reply. It was no good talking to Oliver, in this mood.

Oliver made a disgusted noise, “I told her it looked fine to me yesterday and she got all shirty with me. Wanted to know if that was my ‘considered medical opinion’. She said she’ll fix it this weekend and you’re not to play for several days after. A week she said! No consideration of training schedules! No understanding!”

Oliver paused to take a breath but didn’t seem to expect Harry to say anything, “I’m telling you
Harry, go talk to her. Tell her it hurts too much. It’s an emergency and you’re going to bloody cut it off, if she doesn’t do something about it now. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll find you a knife and help you!”

With a growl, Oliver stomped off towards the boy’s dormitory.

“What happened to your hand?” asked Hermione, concerned.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. Apparently, this was how Snape planned to explain away the Quidditch ban, but it left Harry to make some difficult explanations. He supposed it was better than telling people he’d been using inappropriate charms on first years, but still. He didn’t like to tell Ron and Hermione the business about being punished for missing a meal. Ron would rant and rave about the unfairness, but Hermione might very well side with Snape. Harry didn’t need either reaction, when he wasn’t sure how he felt about it himself. “Oh, it’s nothing, I just fell, you know…”

Hermione looked fierce, suddenly, “No, you didn’t” she said, sharply.

Ron leaned forward, suddenly looking much more awake and alert, “Did something happen last night? With Snape?” Ron looked around them, dropped his voice, “Did he hurt you?”

Harry felt his cheeks turn hot, “No...no, nothing like that. It’s just,” Harry suddenly knew he’d made the wrong choice in what to explain. He wished he could crawl under the the carpet, rather than talk about this, and he knew his friends would be quicker than the adults (except for Snape, perhaps), to see through his usual lies.

He took a deep breath, deciding to chance this little bit of truth. It wasn’t like it was anything Snape and Pomfrey didn’t already know. “This one time,” Harry said, clenching and unclenching the hand that seemed to become stiff, as he thought about it, “My cousin and his friend caught me and they broke my hand.”

Harry didn’t think he’d ever forget the not-quite-noise it had made as the door slammed into his hand. A sickening crunch, accompanied by a pain so sharp, it wasn’t real. Dudley and Piers had gone further than they meant to, that time. Aunt Petunia had even given him a paracetamol and an ice pack that night, when it became clear that the pain and swelling in his hand hadn’t gone away yet. “It didn’t heal right, Madam Pomfrey says. She says I’ve got inflammation in the joints.”

“Your cousin broke your hand?” gasped Hermione.

“That bastard.” growled Ron.

“It wasn’t a big deal.” Harry shrugged, “Dudley could hardly ever catch me, it was just that one time. I don’t think he expected it to happen, you know?” Harry said, “Anyway, it was a while ago. And Madam Pomfrey’s going to fix it, so don’t worry about it.” he finished, firmly. He didn’t look at his friends as he said this, but he knew they were exchanging worried, confused looks “Look, I’m hungry. Let me go change and we’ll go get breakfast early, okay?”

Hopefully, Snape would be there to see that Harry was not missing another meal.

Snuffles stayed contentedly next to Hermione while Harry and Ron went up to get ready for breakfast. When they headed down to the Great Hall, the great dog continued out to the Entrance Hall and then out onto the grounds.

Their conversation was a bit stilted, as they sat eating. Hermione seemed to want to say something and was biting her tongue.
“Mr. Potter.” Snape’s deep voice, right behind him, nearly made Harry tip his tea into his lap.

“Yes?” Harry asked, sharply, turning around.

Snape raised one eyebrow, “I imagine Mr. Wood has informed you that you have been added to the injured list?”

Harry nodded.

Snape’s mouth compressed into a line and his eyes were narrowed. He reached into the one of the pockets of his robes and drew out a thin object. He held it out to Harry, who took it slowly. It took Harry a second to realize what it was: a Muggle pen. It had an odd triangular grip that was thicker and softer than normal. The end looked as though it had been spelled to have a tip like a quill, however.

“Sir?” asked Harry, confused, “What’s this for?”

“I’m sure your other teachers would appreciate legible handwriting from you, quite as much as I would. Try using that, rather than a quill, until Madam Pomfrey mends your hand.” Snape said, archly, “Now, I will assume, we will not see a repeat of last night’s antics?”

“No, sir.” replied Harry, gloomily.

“Good.” Snape turned and walked away with robes in full billow.

The rest of the day was uneventful, although at lunch, Harry remembered the odd conversation he’d had with Ginny, the night before. He looked down the table at her, seeing her sitting near Colin Creevy. She was sitting alone, but she didn’t look unhappy, merely a bit preoccupied. Her lunch was in front of her, barely touched, and she was pushing her food around on her plate with her fork, a tiny smile at the corners of her mouth.

She saw him looking at her. Instead of blushing and looking away as she usually did, she gave him a sweet, rather wistful smile. Harry smiled back, feeling reassured, and went back to eating his own lunch.

That afternoon, he used Snuffles as an excuse to walk out on the grounds right after class.

An excuse, because it appeared the dog didn’t have any trouble finding his way around the castle himself, and had been waiting at the entry to Gryffindor Tower when Harry was on his way in. Harry reckoned Snuffles could probably find his way in and out well enough, but he wasn’t about to tell Snape that.

He didn’t dare stay out long though, and it was apparently a good thing. As he was walking back in, he nearly ran into Snape in the entryway of the castle.

Snape didn’t say anything. He just stood, with his arms crossed, glowering. He nodded to Harry, who nodded back nervously, without speaking. Snuffles whined and moved closer to Harry.

Harry made sure he was at dinner early, and in the common room right after, not wanting to spend the evening in Snape’s office, cleaning cauldrons.

Snuffles tucked himself into the corner of the common room, under the table Harry, Ron and Hermione where were doing their homework. Harry was grateful the dog had such a calm disposition, as it offset his size. After the initial ooh-ing and aah-ing, most people didn’t pay any more attention to him than to Hermione’s big, ugly cat, Crookshanks, who was now snoozing
contentedly next to the dog.

“I hope he gets along that well with Scabbers.” remarked Ron, a little darkly. Scabbers was Ron’s rat, that Hermione’s cat took great pleasure in chasing whenever he got the chance. So much so, that Ron had taken to magically locking the rat into the the boy’s dorm during the day. Privately, Harry thought that it might be a kindness, if Crookshanks caught the rat. Scabbers had looked quite ill, and frankly, not long for this world, all term.

The common room slowly emptied as it got later. Harry finished his homework and moved on to just reading. He was never in any hurry to go to bed.

The three of them moved to the chairs by the fire. Crookshanks curled up on Hermione’s lap and Snuffles stretched out in front of the fire. By half past ten, it was just the three of them in the common room. Harry and Ron talking over the chances of the Chudley Cannon’s making this year’s Quidditch Finals and Hermione reading some thick book or another.

Hermione closed her book, stretching, “Well, I think...” she began, but she didn’t finish, because just then, Ginny came down the stairs.

Ginny was wearing her dressing gown and looked sleepy eyed, as though she had just woken up, “Oh. Hello.” she said blearily, “I didn’t know you’d be here.” she said. Her voice was slurred.

“Hey, Ginny.” said Ron, “What’s the matter? Can’t sleep?”

Ginny smiled a little oddly, sitting down hard on the settee next to Hermione, “I thought it would have worked by now.” she said, “I must have brewed it wrong. And it is the full moon, isn’t it? It’s supposed to be ready on the full moon.” Her voice was a little petulant, and sounded much younger than she normally did.

Ron and Harry looked at each other, having no idea what she was talking about.

“‘What do you mean?’” asked Hermione, her eyes were wide as she looked at Ron and Harry, and then her eyes flew back to Ginny, "What's wrong?" As usual, she seemed to be getting something before either of them.

“Neville’s so much better at this sort of thing.” Ginny said softly, her face serene, “His hands shake, though. Did you know that? He can’t do the wand movements right. And Snape scares him so much, he can’t ever keep his mind on what he’s doing.” She looked at the backs of her her own hands, holding them out in front of her “Maybe I did do it right. My fingers feel sort of funny.” she rubbed them together, “They’re cold.”

In the dim light of the common room, Ginny looked very pale. Harry saw that she was becoming paler by the second. Her lips were very dark, almost purple.

Hermione reached over and took one of the hands Ginny was still rubbing together, “You’re like ice!” she exclaimed. Hermione turned Ginny’s hand over in her own. Her nails were blue and the blue color was creeping up her fingers.

“Ginny?” Hermione’s voice rose an octave in alarm, “What have you done?”

“Hmm?” Ginny’s eyes were glassy, “Don’t worry.” she said softly, “You don’t need to worry about me anymore.”

“Ron.” said Hermione, very softly, “I think you’d better get Madam Pomfrey.”
Ron nodded in agreement, standing up, “Yeah, all right.” he said in a voice that Harry had heard him use before, when he was out of his depth, knew it, and was making no pretence of it.

“Don’t you dare.” hissed Ginny, rising to her feet. Gone was the dreaminess of a moment ago, “You lot mind your own bloody business.” Ginny’s face had gone grey. Sweat gleamed on her forehead. Her voice lacked any volume, coming out as a breathless whisper. As they watched, she took two trembling steps away from them and crumpled into a heap onto the floor.

For an endless second they stared at her. Hermione was the first to break out of her shock, dashing over to Ginny and turning her onto her back. “Ron!” She shrieked, “Go get Madam Pomfrey! NOW!”

Ron started, as though she had slapped him, “Right.” he said, dashing out of the portrait hole.

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” Hermione was saying loudly. Harry had never heard Hermione sound so scared, “Oh no, Ginny! Oh Ginny!” She practically yelled into Ginny's face. She put her ear up to Ginny’s mouth, as though listening to her breathe. Harry could see that Hermione had started to cry. She pinched Ginny’s nose and held her chin with her other hand, then she put her mouth on Ginny’s. When she took it off, she listened to Ginny’s breathing again. Abruptly, Harry realized Ginny wasn’t breathing. From where he was, he could see her chest was perfectly still.

Dimly Harry was aware that he had also leapt to his feet, and was standing very close to Hermione and Ginny, unsure of what to do. Snuffles stood at his right, leaning against his thigh.

Hermione put two fingers to Ginny’s throat, at the curve of her jaw, “Harry! Go get Snape!” Hermione cried suddenly, almost sobbing with fear, although her shaking hands were now moving down to Ginny’s chest with purpose, “I think she’s taken a potion!”

Harry ran as if Voldemort himself were on his heels, out of the portrait hole and down the corridor, taking every shortcut he knew to the dungeons, praying that Snape was in his quarters, not wandering the castle somewhere. When he came to Snape’s door, he used the butt of his wand to bang on it.

After a second, Snape, wearing a dark green dressing gown, snatched open his door, snarling, “What is the meaning of this?”

“Sir.” gasped Harry, “Ginny Weasley. She’s taken a potion. It’s bad. In the common room.”

Snape stared at Harry, then, “Come in here, Potter.” he snapped.

“Sir! We don’t have time! She’s...” Harry began to protest.

Snape gave one of his growls and simply dragged Harry in by the shoulder to his fireplace. He grabbed a box of floo powder from the mantle. He threw a handful into the flames, “Gryffindor Tower” he called, and then stepped into the fire, dragging Harry with him.

He let go of Harry as soon as they hit the common room floor. Harry fell onto his hands and knees onto the hearth rug. The common room seemed to have gotten very crowded since Harry had gone to get Snape. Harry couldn’t see Ginny and Hermione, with the crowd of students around them.

“Get back!” Snape ordered, “Back to your dormitories!. Now!”

The students moved back, out of his way. Some of them going up the stairs, but some of them, only going as far as the wall. Fred and George stood next to Percy, at the bottom of the stairs, the three of them wearing the same terrified expression. Harry had never realized how much Percy resembled
Fred and George before.

Harry heard someone counting out loud, “One and two and three and four and five and six and seven and eight...”

“What on earth is going on here?!” cried Professor McGonagall’s voice, “Miss Granger! Miss. Lloyd! What are you doing?”

“They’re doing the right thing, Minerva.” Said Snape. The students were out of the way now. Harry could see what was happening now, around the settee. Snape had knelt beside Ginny and was pointing his wand at her, “Don’t stop yet.” he said, to the two girls who were bending over Ginny’s body.

A seventh year Harry didn’t know, was also kneeling beside Ginny, now. Marian Lloyd, Harry thought her name was. She was leaning with her palms on Ginny’s chest, pushing on it. It was she who was counting. When she counted to fifteen, Hermione leaned over and put her mouth on Ginny’s and Ginny’s chest rose.

Harry had seen this before, but in his panic, he couldn’t think of where.

The fireplace flared green, Harry scrambled out of the way.


“It looks like an overdose of a Draught of Peace. There’s residue still on her mouth.” said Snape, quickly, “Her heart stopped. Lloyd and Granger started CPR, so I believe...Yes...there’s magical activity. There’s still time, she’s not gone, yet.”

“You think the two of us are enough?” Madam Pomfrey asked.

“She’s small. And I will do it alone, if I must.” Snape snarled.

Beside Harry, Snuffles made a sharp little movement, as if to run forward, Harry put his hand on the dog’s collar.

“I believe, there are three of us here.” McGonagall put in, briskly, “I don’t know the incantation, but I know the principle.’

Snape nodded, sharply.

“Lloyd, Granger, step away.” said Snape, taking McGonagall’s hand. Madam Pomfrey took the other. Pomfrey and Snape aimed their wands at Ginny who jerked where she lay on the floor. Snape said a long, harsh sounding incantation and there was a flash of white light.

McGonagall gave a little cry, as if she’d been stung.

The adults dropped each other’s hands. Snape and Pomfrey knelt beside Ginny, “Yes. Yes!” cried Snape. The man sounded jubilant, “She’s back!”

“She’s not breathing on her own, yet.” Madam Pomfrey pointed her wand at Ginny’s mouth and muttered. A glowing blue ball appeared over her mouth and nose. Ginny’s color started turning from sort of a blotchy purple to a sickly, pale grey.

“We have to move her gently.” Madam Pomfrey said, conjuring a stretcher and blankets. “Severus will you inform the headmaster, as well?”
“Of course.” He shot silver from the end of his wand, “Minerva? I’m going to help Poppy.” he said to Professor McGonagall, “You should come down to the hospital wing and have a Pepper-up, at the very least.”

The Professor had sat down, looking very, very tired. “Of course, Severus.” she said, distantly. Snape looked at her with concern, then at Percy, “You.” he snapped, “ Escort Professor McGonagall down to the hospital wing.” he stopped, sighed, looked at Fred and George “The rest of you Weasleys. You may as well all come. Your sister is out of danger, but I’m sure all of you will want to reassure yourselves of that, before you do anything else.” He looked then at Ron, Harry, Hermione and the seventh year girl, “The headmaster will want to interview all of you, I imagine. So, if you could all accompany the Professor?” His voice was lacking its’ usual edge.

“Professor Snape?” asked Hermione slowly, “What did you just do?” her voice was still high pitched, and frightened.

Snape sighed again, glanced at Madam Pomfrey, who was still fussing with making sure Ginny was ready to be moved, “We were able to restart her heart, because her brain was still alive. To put it simply, we had to part with some of our own life energy. To put it simply, we had to part with some of our own life energy. It is too late in the evening to be discussing magical theory, Miss Granger. Suffice to say, that it was harder on Professor McGonagall than myself, because of the difference in our ages. Now, see to her, please. I will see to your housemate.”

Harry stared hard at Snape, wondering about what the man had just said. How much of this life energy had he just given away? Was it something that came back? Snape was moving very stiffly and slowly now, as was Pomfrey. McGonagall looked like they just might need to carry her.

Whatever they had just done, it seemed like they had put themselves in harm’s way, for a student. Harry could see either McGonagall or Pomfrey doing that, without hesitation. As they had just done. But Snape? Snape the bastard? Snape the git? He was unfair and a bully. He was a nasty, evil prat who picked on people in class, was known to make even forth years cry, and played favorites, outrageously.

That evil bat had just told Pomfrey he’d do it by himself, if he had to. He didn’t even like Ginny.

As Harry watched, Snape swayed, caught himself on the back of the settee. He saw Harry watching and glared. The man’s eyes were sunken and there were lines around his mouth that hadn’t been there, a moment ago.

“Ready, Severus?” asked Madam Pomfrey, tiredly, levitating Ginny on the stretcher. They both put their hands on the stretcher, but Harry couldn’t tell whether it was to steady Ginny or themselves.

“Madam Pomfrey?” said Marian Lloyd, suddenly, “I’m pretty good at levitation. Why don’t I do that? And you and Professor Snape just tell me what to do? Don’t forget, I can help you in the hospital wing too.”

Madam Pomfrey looked at her a, little vaguely, “Yes, of course, dear. I forgot.”

“Harry,” Marian whispered to him, “Go get Professor Sprout. She does healing too. Meet us in the hospital wing.”

Harry ran out the front door of the common room just as the fire flared to life, with the unmistakable sound of the floo being activated.

“What has happened?” asked Dumbledore. His voice was uncharacteristically shocked.
Harry didn’t wait to hear what they had to tell Dumbledore, as intent as he was, to get another healer on the scene.
Chapter Summary

In which we find the reasons for Ginny's action.

Chapter Notes

There's a mild amount of "ick" factor here. Some mention of bodily fluids.

The students were mercifully quiet, as they made their slow way to the hospital wing. Severus leaned heavily on the levitating stretcher, confident in Miss Lloyd’s spell. She was in his seventh year potions seminar, with ambitions to be a healer and therefore, was actually a useful pair of hands in this little party. He was very grateful that Miss Lloyd was such a competent girl, for a Gryffindor.

He wanted to sleep for a week, but naturally no such thing was possible for some hours, yet. The headmaster would have to send an owl to Saint Mungo’s to request a healer. Miss Weasley would not be able to be moved for several days, at least.

This was not the first near-suicide in his tenure at Hogwarts, but it was rare to have such an obvious one in Gryffindor. They tended to be a little cagier about their self destructive tendencies. Dares and foolish risks were their more usual maneuvers. Then, if they failed, it was all merely a joke.

A Peace Draught was complicated, for a second year. He wondered how she’d learned to make it. It was a fourth year potion and the child must have ingested about a gallon of it, to have stopped her heart. That, or she had found, and followed, the instructions to reduce it, under the light of a full moon. The full moon had risen a few hours ago tonight. There would have been time.

The instructions for that variation weren’t available, except to seventh years. The process wasn’t difficult, nor the knowledge restricted, but it would have required some digging to find; the variation was generally only used for those who required it for specific circumstances.

Severus knew that this had been no mere gesture. The child had meant it. Whatever pain she was suffering, she was serious that she wanted it to end. Miss Weasley had gone about it with all the determination of a Hufflepuff, the intelligence of a Ravenclaw and the deviousness of a Slytherin.

Dumbledore had conjured a stretcher for Minerva; she was already asleep on it. He had offered to conjure one for Severus, but his expression must have been answer enough for the headmaster. Poppy had similarly glared daggers at Dumbledore, before requesting loudly that a house elf bring herself and Severus a Pepper Up potion from the hospital wing.

It was a good thing she had. It hadn’t occurred to Severus, at all (a testament to his weariness) and he would not have made it without one.
“Make some good, strong coffee, perhaps Turkish, and bring some food, as well. Severus likes scones. I’d like some meat pies,” Poppy said to the house elf, before it popped off, “And chocolate, some sandwiches, and...Oh, just bring up a whole tray. Enough for all of us. We’ll be starving. You know what we like.”

It had taken a few more moments for Miss Lloyd to help he and Poppy maneuver Miss Weasley’s stretcher out of the portrait hole. Severus was looking forward to a cup of that coffee.

“Why would she do something like that?” one of the Weasley brothers asked in a whisper, finally.

“I don’t know.” sighed Dumbledore, he was walking alongside Minerva’s stretcher, behind Severus, Poppy and Miss Lloyd who had Miss Weasley’s, “I would like to talk to all of you, before Miss Weasley wakes up. Perhaps we can find some clue.”

“Do you think You-Know-Who could be still possessing her?” one of the other boys asked. Severus was too tired to keep track.

“No, Mr Weasley,” replied the headmaster, gently, “Although, I do believe that very likely has something to do with it.”

“She will be all right, though?” Granger asked, her voice sounded incongruously cool and serene

“Thanks to your quick thinking, Miss Granger, and Miss Lloyd’s, yes.” Dumbledore said, “Where did you learn that particular Muggle technique?”

“Mum and Dad made me take a Red Cross class, last summer.” Granger replied, quietly, “I thought it was stupid at the time. How many wizards have heart attacks? But, Mum said I had to.”

“And Miss Lloyd?”

“I’m Muggleborn too, Professor, remember?” the blond girl replied, “I took it when I started minding my niece. My sister wouldn’t let me, until I took child and infant CPR and the rest. She’s really fussy.” Lloyd said shyly.

“Hm. I suppose points to Gryffindor are in order, then,” twinkled the headmaster, even given the grimness of the situation.

“I’d say bloody special award, for not allowing another fucking ghost to be added to this bloody, fucking school.” muttered Severus. Poppy and Miss Lloyd glanced at him. Poppy in amusement, Lloyd in shock.

Had he said that out loud? Merlin, he must be tired. He’d be sounding like his father coming off a shift, in a minute.

Resolutely, he decided to keep his mouth shut, until he had a strong cup of coffee in him and at least another Pepper Up.

Pomona came bustling down the corridor with Potter in tow. It appeared the boy had some presence of mind.

“Severus! Poppy! Mr. Potter told me Miss Weasley was hurt?” She took in the two stretchers and the whole cavalcade of them.

“We had to use Tribuo Vita, Pomona” Poppy said, softly, “Minerva’s knackered. Severus and I aren’t far behind.”

Pomona’s eyes widened, “Right then. The three of you, into bed.” she ordered, matter of factly, “I’ll
look after the patient. I’ve already owled St Mungo’s; from what Mr. Potter told me, we’ll need a couple of their healers.” Pomona took Poppy’s arm and gestured to Lloyd to bring Miss Weasley’s stretcher along. The four Weasley boys followed it.

Severus let go of the stretcher and realized that was, perhaps, not a wise idea. He felt his legs tremble, so he leaned against the wall, closing his eyes.

Someone grabbed his elbow, steadying him, guiding him into a chair that someone must have conjured. Small hands. Severus cracked his eyes open, realizing the hands belonged to Potter. Damn him.

“Are you all right?” the boy asked, sounding concerned.

“Fine.” grunted Severus. The headmaster must have conjured the chair. It was his signature squishy armchair sort of thing.

There was no urgency for Severus to get into the hospital wing. They would do well enough on their own for a few minutes. He closed his eyes again, waiting for the weakness to pass.

A small noise let him know that Potter was still there.

Why was the damned boy still standing there? Couldn’t he go offer comfort or support or whatever to the other Weasleys?

“What, Potter?” Severus growled, leaning his head back.

“Can I get you something?” Potter asked, softly.

“Some of that coffee Madam Pomfrey ordered. With a lot of sugar. Five or six teaspoons, at least.” Severus replied, without opening his eyes. If he gave the brat something to do, he wouldn’t stand there, staring at him.

It seemed merely a second before the unmistakable smell of coffee, redolent with the smell of cinnamon and cardamon, roused Severus from his almost-doze. He opened his eyes with an effort.

“Sir?” Potter held out an absolutely enormous cup of coffee, “Professor Sprout said it already had sugar in it and it didn’t need milk. Professor Dumbledore wants to know if you need him to come and fetch you.”

“Absolutely not.” Severus tried to snarl, but it was only an irritable mutter. He took the mug of coffee in both hands, gulping it down, even though it was hot enough to burn his tongue. Inwardly he nodded approval. It was thick Turkish stuff, boiled with the sugar in it. Hot as hell, black as the devil, sweet as a stolen kiss.

A moment passed, Severus closed his eyes again, cradled the mug with the thick dregs in the bottom in his lap, waiting for the caffeine and sugar to hit his brain. He didn’t like to use any stronger stimulants, they could damage him, in this state.

The spell normally required three people, so they were fortunate that Minerva had known enough about the spell to assist. It would have been a risk, to do it with just two of them. Severus didn’t know if he would have wanted Poppy to take the risk. She wasn’t as old as Minerva, true, but she also wasn’t either as young or (in all honesty) as powerful as Severus. What Poppy lacked in pure power, she made up for in knowledge and technique. They couldn’t afford to lose her, or her skills. People depended on Poppy.
It wouldn’t have killed Severus, if he’s done it alone (in all probability). It most likely wouldn’t have even badly damaged him, but Dumbledore would have needed to find a replacement Potions Master for the rest of the term.

And a replacement guardian for Potter, he suddenly realized.

Dammit. He was too tired to think about that, right now. It was very comfortable to just drift off, with his head leaning back on the chair.

“Er, Professor? You’re going to tip that.” A distant voice told him. He felt the mug plucked out of his hands.

He didn’t understand why Lily was referring to him as “Professor”. At least, it sounded like Lily’s voice. Maybe. Had to be, because now she’d thrown a blanket over him. His dad must have chucked him out of the house again. He hoped Mrs. Evans wasn’t going to be angry when she found him, kipping in her living room. He drifted further off into a comfortable blackness.

Severus heard the sound of a floo and started a little. He shook his head and opened his eyes properly. How long had he been dozing?

The boy had found a chair and was sitting there, staring at his own cup of something.

“How long have I slept?” Severus demanded, harshly,

“How long have I slept?” replied Potter, looking up with fear haunted eyes, “I think the healers are here.

Severus staggered to his feet. Potter was there at his elbow and if Severus hadn’t been so truly weak and off balance he would have shouted at the boy. As it was, he grudgingly put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, “Right.”

He staggered into the hospital wing, with the boy half supporting him. He scowled at the headmaster’s raised eyebrows, daring him to comment. Potter led him to the first chair and Severus sat down (collapsed, really).

Poppy and Minerva were sound asleep, on two of the beds. The Weasley boys were gathered, at the near end with Granger and Lloyd. The Headmaster appeared to be getting ready to question them with them.

“Where is Miss Weasley?” asked Severus. He didn’t bother to keep his voice down. Nothing would wake either Poppy or Minerva for some hours, if they’d gotten properly to sleep.

Dumbledore pointed to the end of the hospital wing where a curtained-off area hid the activity of what appeared to be several healers, “They just arrived by flu from St. Mungos.” he said, “They were wondering if, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley get here, if you might be able to get some idea from Ginny why she would do something like this?”

“She hasn’t recovered enough to speak yet?” asked Severus, heavily. Then he knew the answer, before the headmaster shook his head, “Oh, of course.” he said, almost to himself.

An overdose of Peace would leave the child paralyzed, for several days, even her breathing would need to be induced magically. Any of the antidotes for Peace would kill her, now. One could only wait for it to wear off, by itself. The Tribuo Vita would keep her heart alive until the potion wore off, but she was in for a frightening few days.

Severus said, bitterly, “I’ll need more of that coffee, then.”
Potter jumped up, like a bloody house elf, before Severus was even done speaking.

Dumbledore turned to the children, “Do any of you know why Ginny might do such a thing, as this?”

As one, the children all shook their heads in a muddled, bemused sort of way.

“She’s been really down, all term, but it’s not like that hasn’t been going around.” one of the twins said.

The other one nodded, “Mum told us to keep an eye on her. She seemed to cheer up the last couple of days, though.”

“Well, I haven’t noticed anything.” said the oldest one, Percy Weasley, “She’s actually been very interested in her studies this year. Much moreso than last. She’s been very interested in improving her potion marks. I’ve been helping her.”

Considering that Miss Weasley had spent a great deal of last year being possessed by some fragment of the Dark Lord, it was no wonder she had not been interested in her studies.

Potter came back with Severus’ coffee and some variety of baked good. He put both into Severus hands and then took his seat between Granger and the youngest Weasley boy.

“Do you know who she was close to?” asked Dumbledore gently, “Anyone at all, who we should ask?”

Granger said in a very soft, overly composed voice, “I’ve been thinking about it Professor, I can’t think of anyone Ginny was close to, other than us and Neville. Last year was such a wreck for her, you see. The only person I ever saw her with, was Neville.” she paused, Severus noted her eyes were a little unfocused, “You know, she told me that I had to go to the teachers, about Harry. If I didn’t, the same thing would happen to Harry that happened to Neville and I’d be making the same mistake she had.”


The girl rose, like an automaton. Her face was completely smooth, free of worry, fear or anxiety.

She stood in front of him. Fortunately, he was tall enough that he could do this without having to stand. He lit his wand, shining the light in her eyes, noting with some apprehension, that her pupils only reacted sluggishly.

Severus remembered that Granger had been breathing for the girl, without any protection, into the girl’s mouth. It was not unusual for a victim to vomit, during CPR. God only knew, what ingesting a partially digested, potentially lethal potion would do.

Severus gulped down the coffee he still held in one hand. “Fuck.” he grated, earning shocked looks from all of them, except Granger, who just looked at him with detached interest.

Why had he fallen asleep? Poppy was out of it too. No one else realized. But, didn’t they see it? Lloyd’s eyes were red and she was shaking with reaction. The boys were sitting or standing around, trying to pretend that they weren’t on the verge of weeping, as well.

Thirteen year old girls, who had just given a classmate CPR, should not be this composed.

There were several antidotes to “Peace”. But it wasn’t going to be pretty when he gave one to her.
Not after this evening.

Dammit.

“Dumbledore” snapped Severus, “Miss Granger needs attention. Get one of those healers in here.”

“Professor Dumbledore?” Granger asked in a small voice, “I was wondering, could my mum come to visit?”

Severus started nodding, “Headmaster, if she’s asking for her mum right now, I suggest you send someone to apparate down there and retrieve Dr. Granger.”

That would actually be ideal, if they could get Granger’s mother here, for the inevitable hysteria. Severus waved his wand, doing a few diagnostic spells. The child seemed stable enough. He could turn her over to one of the healers, in good conscience.

Dumbledore nodded sharply, turned and called for one of the healers. A woman in green robes came hurrying over.

“Severus says Miss Granger needs attention.” said Dumbledore.

“While helping revive Miss Weasley, she ingested some of the potion.” said Severus.

“Oh, my. How much?” The healer drew out her wand and began running diagnostic spells while the boys began muttering to each other in alarm. Miss Lloyd was now actually crying on one of the twin’s shoulders.

“Not a dangerous amount, but I believe it should be counteracted.” said Severus, “Otherwise she might be weeks sleeping it off. And the longer we leave it, the worse it will be, when she comes off of it.”

The healer nodded, “I see what you mean.” she said reading the numbers the diagnostic charm was returning, “The child made a damned strong concoction.”

“I suggest you wait until Granger’s parents arrive, however.” Severus suggested.

The healer looked around and nodded, resigned. She took Granger by the shoulders, “You just come along with me, dear.” she said.

“Thank you, Severus.” breathed Dumbledore, “I hesitate to ask more of you...”

“But you will.” Severus snarled. He summoned a quill from a nearby table and transfigured it into a cane for balance. If he was going to need a walking stick for any length of time, he was going to have to get himself a properly ominous looking one, he thought, distractedly. Lucius’ snake topped one was rather nice.

At least it prevented Potter from jumping up and trying to help him, this time.

Severus was aware that the headmaster would probably prefer to do this himself. Unfortunately, since it involved potions, he might not understand what he was seeing. It was one thing to Legilimens a mind, another to interpret the impressions. If they happened to look at how Miss Weasly made the potion, for instance, if Miss Weasley used an ingredient unfamiliar to Dumbledore it would be difficult for him to know if Miss Weasley had properly identified the thing.

Dumbledore also had no medical training. It was an entire specialized class that some healers took
(those that had a talent and interest in Legilimency) on the medical uses of the art. A weakened or shocked mind could destroyed, by a mind as powerful as Dumbledore’s, if he made a mistake.

Then there was the advanced Occlumency that Severus had taken. Only a few healers or Aurors took that course of study. It allowed one to enter the mind of the mad or the dying without being caught up in it. Severus actually had no idea if Dumbledore had that skill. It was rare. As rare as Animagi.

Severus hobbled around the screen, nodding at Pomona and the other healer. Pomona drew him up a chair at the bedside. He sat down in it gratefully, placing his stick upright between them and putting both hands on top of it.

Pomona and the Healer stepped back to the head of the bed, where Miss Weasley couldn’t see them, but they could see her and witness the questioning.

Miss Weasley’s color was much better and her eyes were open to slits. The spell that was breathing for her glowed blue around her mouth and nose. A few different monitoring spells were registering her blood pressure, magical activity, and such, on the parchment on the bedside table.

“Well, Miss Weasley,” Severus said, coolly, as though he were there to discuss an inadequate potions essay, “You seem to have caused quite a bit of turmoil tonight, with your actions. I wonder if, perhaps, that was your plan?”

He kept his voice carefully neutral, not wanting to frighten her, but he did not soften it, too much, either. Nothing would frighten the child so much as too great a change in his manner. So, he spoke to her as he would speak to one of his Slytherin first years that he had caught weeping in the dormitories, late at night.

Her eyes widened as she grunted.

He held up his hand quickly, “You’ll find you can’t speak. There is a spell that is supporting your breathing. The muscles of your respiration will not work for another day or two.”

Tears started to slip slowly down the girl’s cheeks. Severus knew she wouldn’t be able to lift a hand to wipe them, so he took out a handkerchief did it for her.

Unable to cringe or turn her face away, her pupils constricted in fear. Severus sighed and pushed what had to be an itchy piece of hair out of her face.

“The paralysis is temporary, I assure you.” If this had been an accidental poisoning, Severus would have told her how lucky she’d been that Granger and Lloyd had known what to do.

“Now, so we that have some method of communication, I would like you to blink once for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no’. Do you understand?”

Ones slow eye blink.

Severus nodded, “Miss Weasley, we would rather like to know how this happened. Since you will not be able to talk, I am going to enter your mind. It is a spell that might cause you some discomfort. There will be more, if you fight me. Do you understand?”

Two rapid eye blinks. Two more rapid eye blinks. Two more rapid eye blinks.

The child’s face went very white. The ink in the automatically recording quill marked her blood pressure in red, rather than black, to show a sudden, ominous change.
“Professor Snape!” The healer said, sharply.

“Please, calm yourself.” Severus said, quietly to the girl, “I take it you do understand, but you wish to withhold consent?”

One eye blink.

Severus sat for a few minutes, not saying anything until the recording quill’s ink turned to black. He sighed, “Please don’t mistake this for a request, Miss Weasley,” he said very softly, when he spoke again. Her eyes had closed, but he knew she hadn’t fallen asleep.

Her eyes opened, but before she could work herself into a state, he went on, keeping his voice level and soothing, “Your parents will be here, soon. We aren’t sure whether they should be allowed to see you, or not. We don’t know if any of your brothers, Miss Granger or Mr. Potter should be allowed to see you. Or frankly, whether we should send you to the locked ward at St Mungo’s.”

Pomona came forward, “Ginny, Professor Snape’s done this before, you know. It’s uncomfortable, but it won’t hurt.”

A long pause as the girl’s eyes moved from Pomona’s face to Severus’ and back. Finally, one tired eye blink.

Pomona moved back, out of the way.

Severus leaned forward to place his hand on one of Miss Weasley’s, feeling that she probably needed the reassurance.

He looked into her eyes, “Leglimens”

The girl’s mind was a morass of pain and guilt, but thankfully, it was not the disjointed nonsense of delusion.

“What kind of idiot falls for that?” she was crying on someone’s shoulder, “I hurt people! I nearly killed people!”

They were sitting in the darkness of an unused classroom. She and a boy. It was hard to see who.

“Ginny. It’s okay, nobody blames you.” that was Longbottom’s voice.

“But, they should! They DO! How can normal people even stand to be around me?”

“Look, Ginny, everyone’s got...stuff...they can’t talk about.”

The scene changed, She and Longbottom were walking around the lake.

“...can’t ever get the wand stuff right. Think this wand doesn’t like me. Anyway, my hand shakes. I don’t know why.” Longbottom was saying, with a shrug.

“I can help you.” she said, “If I do, do you think we can make it?”

“It’s all botanical. Yeah. I’m really good with botanicals. It’d be better than Dreamless Sleep. If you take Dreamless too often, you go crazy. Peace just calms you down.”

“Oh god, Neville, that’d be great. I can’t sleep and I keep seeing,” the child shuddered “Him. Around every corner. I don’t know what to do. It’s like I can feel him, with his hands on me. I think I’m losing my mind.”
“No. You just have bad dreams. Sometimes, I even have them in the daytime. It happens.”

Another jump.

Diagon Alley, a summers day, a chance encounter, “Mum! Can I go get some ice cream with Neville?”

Molly Weasley smiled fondly at her daughter, “Go on, then, love, I’ll find you there, when I get done shopping.”

“Oh, Merlin, Neville! What happened?” she gasped.

Neville sat down stiffly, not sitting back against the chair, a black bruise visible on his wrist, “Gran’s been gone for the summer.” he said by way of explanation.

She stood up, “I have to tell Mum. She’ll do something about it”

Neville reached out and grabbed Ginny’s hand, “No. Ginny, don’t. It’d kill Gran. Look, school starts in three days, right? It’s fine. Don’t worry.”

About a dozen boys showing up, effectively ended that conversation.

The next image was Neville, lying pale and cold with Lupin crouched over him.

Then, there were no more coherent scenes, just a whirl of self loathing and anger and pain. Always destined to trust the wrong people, to make the wrong choices. The knowledge that she was responsible for her best friend’s death. Knowing that she was unfit for decent human company. She replied to her mother’s worried owls with artificial cheer, not wanting the poor woman to realize she’d spawned such a tainted, corrupt creature.

She had ruminated constantly, after Neville’s death, on the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord had whispered terrible things into the girl’s mind. Things that would have surprised no one, if they had only stopped to think of it. Things that would not even normally be out of place, in such a mind, but magnified and twisted.

She tried to scrub the creeping sensation of the memory of the Dark Lord’s touch from her flesh, then she tried to cut it away. Nothing worked. The pain didn’t stop. The pain would never stop.

Severus’ carefully wrought Occlumency shields slipped. For a moment, he was no longer Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master. For one endless second he was merely Sev, who had utterly failed to protect his best friend, and had nothing in the world left to live for.

His eyes slipped away and the spell fell. Reality reasserted itself. Tears and snot were mixing on his face and he wiped his face with disgust, blowing his nose before turning back to Miss Weasley.

The healer and Pomona had tactfully found something to do, behind the head of the bed, that seemed to occupy them, without taking them out of sight or earshot.

Miss Weasley’s face was also a mess. Severus very carefully wiped her up, “I’m very sorry for your loss.” he said, in a low voice. He reached down and pushed back the arm of her robe. He turned the arm over. There were little sideways cuts, running all up and down the arm. All in different stages of healing. Some as recent as yesterday.

He shook his head, sighed. He’d seen this sort of thing before. They were very superficial. He gave his wand a quick wave, summoning one of Poppy’s ever-present dittany salves to his hand. Without
a word, he dabbed it all over the cuts and lay the arm back on the bed.

Miss Weasley’s eyes looked very confused. He indulged himself in a tired smirk, “Are there others?”

Two slow blinks

Good, he didn’t fancy playing twenty questions.

The unmistakable odor of bodily fluids filled the room. Miss Weasley’s eyes dilated, then constricted, in horror, as she realized that the odor was from her.

Severus raised an eyebrow, “If your respiratory muscles are not working,” he said, recovering his dry tone, “You can hardly expect other muscles to work.” he softened again, as she reddened, with shame,

“Professor Sprout?” called Severus, not moving from his chair, realizing the girl didn’t know where Pomona and the healer were, “Miss Weasley, and I could do with some help.”

Pomona looked up sharply, as did the healer. Pomona bustled over, and then gave an understanding, “Ah.” She levitated the child off the bed.

Severus muttered a cleaning spell, doing clothes, sheets and blankets at once, wishing that shit was the worst thing he’d had to clean up tonight.

Pomona laid her gently back down on the now clean, dry sheets, “Not to worry. In a minute,” she told Miss Weasley, “The healer will do some spells, so that doesn’t happen again, all right?”

One slow blink.

“Miss Weasley?” Severus asked. He waited for her to focus on him, “Would you like to see your mother?”

One blink. Open, pleading eyes, with huge pupils and tears. More snot, which Severus leaned forward to wipe.

“I’ll go see if she’s here yet, shall I?” leaning heavily on his stick Severus stood.

The healer followed him out, “So, it would be all right for the girl to see her mother?” she asked, anxiously.

“I believe it would be beneficial, in fact” replied Severus. “It appears the child was distraught over the Longbottom death. The boy was her best friend, you see.”

“Ah, and the young are always dramatic. I imagine she had no idea how upsetting people would find it.” she said, her manner turning a trifle patronizing. She sniffed, “Thank you. I’ll see to finding her mother. We’ll decide whether we should involve the Ministry after we speak with her parents.”

“The Ministry?” Severus said slowly, “We needn’t involve them. Just...be kind to her,” he was suddenly wary of how wizards regarded attempted suicides. He was not going to have a paralyzed girl subjected to some healer’s misplaced disdain. Nor facing the consequences her rash action could bring. Damned 19th Century morals. “It was a Draught of Peace, not a restricted potion. She was trying to assuage her grief, not join the boy.”

“So, you believe it was accidental?” the healer asked, doubtfully.

“It’s a complex potion.” shrugged Severus, “I have her in my second year, she’s an average student.”
“Oh, of course.” The woman's face cleared and she was suddenly all sympathy again, damn her.

He headed to the nearest bed, collapsing onto it. Dumbledore could wait till the bloody morning to get his report.
Mrs. Weasley

Chapter Summary

In which Molly Weasley arrives and gives Dumbledore a piece of her mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As he had so often done at the Dursley's, Harry was busy pretending he didn't exist. He'd tucked himself onto one of the window seats, near where the healers had taken Ginny, feeling cold and sick and alone.

The Weasley brothers were still huddled at the other end, sitting on the living room suite that had been conjured, talking in whispers. He didn't think they noticed whether he was there, or not. He felt awkward, intruding on the family crisis. Marian was sitting between Fred and George. Hermione had been taken behind another screen, by one of the healers. Harry hoped she'd be okay. Snape hadn't seemed that concerned, but it was hard to tell. He had told Dumbledore to go get Hermione's mum, though.

Whatever Snape, Pomfrey and McGonagall had done, it had taken a great deal out of them. When they'd been bringing Ginny up, Snape had stopped in the corridor, just outside the hospital wing, as if he could go no further. He' leaned against the wall, closing his eyes. Most alarmingly, his knees had buckled and he'd started to slide down the wall. Harry had been the only one close enough to catch him. Dumbledore had quickly conjured a chair underneath him. Snape stayed awake long enough to drink a cup of the thick black coffee Professor Sprout was giving out, then seemed to pass out. Harry had picked up the remains of the coffee, before they could spill and threw a blanket over the man.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't any better off. She'd stayed awake long enough to talk to the healers and fell asleep mid-sentence. Percy caught her as she fell, setting her limp form on a bed, next to McGonagall.

Harry dragged a chair out into the hall, taking his tea out there. He wasn't sure why he took it upon himself to keep an eye on Snape. It just seemed like someone should. Harry was surprised when Snape had woken up again; rather than merely moving himself to a more comfortable place to sleep, he'd gotten up to see what he could do to help.

Grudgingly, Harry had to admit, he admired Snape. The man had leaned so heavily on him, Harry was convinced he wouldn't make it to the chair. The way he had so quickly realized something was wrong with Hermione, when none of the rest of them had even started to notice, was astonishing.

However, Harry had to wonder why Dumbledore didn't talk to Ginny himself. Surely, if she were that ill and upset, Snape would be the last one who could get her to talk.

It was weird and a little scary, to watch the graceful Snape stagger, with palsey steps, across the room like an elderly Muggle, with the help of a cane. It was then, that Harry had left the Weasley's to sit down against the window. No one noticed him leave.
It was quite a few minutes before Professor Snape stumbled out from behind the screen, where the healers were treating Ginny. He said something to the one who followed him out, in a low voice, about letting her see her mother. He also told the healer to be kind to Ginny.

Harry wondered if someone should check the temperature in Hell. Then, it hit him like a bucket of ice water; Ginny was going to die, after all.

Dumbledore had hurried up the length of the hospital wing, starting to speak to Snape, but the man fell, face first, onto the nearest bed.

The healer merely shook her head at Dumbledore, "It'll have to wait, Professor." she said, "When Mrs. Weasley gets here, send her in." She said more to the headmaster, but her back was angled away from Harry, so he missed the rest.

Dumbledore was facing more toward Harry. Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore knew he was there. The old wizard breathed a huge sigh of relief, "Of course," Dumbledore's face lost some of its' worry lines as he spoke to the healer.

If Dumbledore was looking relieved, that meant that Ginny wasn't going to die. So, they were back to ice skating parties in Hell.

The healer turned around and went back behind the screen.

To Harry's consternation, Dumbledore started walking over to him. Harry hadn't had a conversation with Dumbledore since his guardianship was transferred and he did not want to have one now. As the headmaster was about to say something, the low embers of the fireplace flared to life, with bright green flames. Dumbledore turned away from Harry and hurried to the fireplace.

Molly Weasley stepped out of the fireplace, wearing her dressing gown under her cloak. The Weasley brothers sprang to their feet, crowding around her. They spoke, voices tense, and uncharacteristically quiet, as her eyes swept over them.

She hushed them, "Your father's right behind me." she told them quietly, in apparent answer to their questions, "He wants to firecall Bill, before he leaves."

They nodded.

"Where's Poppy, Albus?" Mrs. Weasley's voice was restrained, as she walked forward, through the crowd of her sons. The hair on the back of Harry's neck stood up. If Snape asking someone to be kind was weird, Mrs. Weasley being restrained was terrifying.

"She is...indisposed..." Dumbledore said, "We have two of the healers from St Mungos here. And Pomona's with Ginny, as well. You'll want to talk to them first."

Through gritted teeth, Mrs. Weasley said, "I want to see my daughter, Albus. Right now."

"Of course, Molly, of course." Dumbledore went forward to take her arm, she snatched it out of his hand. From where he sat, Harry could see Dumbledore's face, sad and worried, Mrs. Weasley's mouth drawn into a harsh frown. Dumbledore dropped his hand slowly, "However, there are a few things you need to understand before you see her." he said, kindly.

"I'm sure the healer can inform me," snapped Mrs Weasley, losing patience, "Where is she?"

Dumbledore indicated the screen. Mrs. Weasley hastened down to it.
The healer from St Mungo's must have heard her. Maybe, she'd set an alarm spell. She came out, to see Mrs. Weasley, "Are you Ginny's mother?" she asked.

Mrs. Weasley nodded, sharply, "I'd like to see her now." she said firmly.

The healer nodded, "I'm about to do some spells, but why don't you come and let her know you're here, before I do. Have they told you anything about her condition?"

"Not yet." said Mrs. Weasley, anxiously.

The healer sighed, "Well, come along, but please remember, this is all only temporary." the healer moved to take Mrs Weasley's arm and speak to her softly. Mrs. Weasley let her. Harry couldn't hear anything else, other than a few gasps and exclamations of dismay from Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley went behind the screen. Harry heard her voice speaking gently, but he never heard the words.

He'd nearly dozed off, with his head against the window, when he heard her emerge from behind the screen. She turned back to say, "Your father and I will be here when you wake up, darling. The healers just want you to have a sleep, while they do these spells All right?"

Ginny never answered her.

Mrs Weasley's eyes were dry as turned around, but the lines around her mouth trembled, as someone suppressing tears. Dumbledore hurried down to meet her.

Mrs. Weasley stopped, almost in front of Harry. She rubbed her hands together as if she were cold.

When Dumbledore came within speaking distance, she drew her wand so fast, that Harry thought she was going to hex the headmaster. He must have too. He dropped back half a step, with his hands raised in a placating gesture, "Molly..." he began quickly.

She turned, "Silencio!" she pointed her wand at the screen that hid Ginny.

She turned back to Dumbledore, "Don't you talk to me Albus Dumbledore!" she cried, "Don't you speak. Not. One. Word." her voice was rising, "I told you!" She shrieked, tears starting down her face, "I will never, ever forgive myself, for listening to you. I have been telling you, for weeks. For WEEKS!" she punctuated her words with pointed jabs of her wand, "But, I know nothing. I..." she turned, "I am merely an overprotective mother!" she spat.

Dumbledore seemed to sag in on himself, with every word

Mrs. Weasley went on, "Pomona told me some very interesting things just now, about my daughter. Things that never reached my ears. Never mind, that I have been owling you daily! Never mind, that I have been owling Ginny three times a week! I told you, she wasn't right!" the sentence ended on a sob.

"Molly, I..." Dumbledore tried to move forward again, as if to comfort her.

"I told you. Not. One. Word. Don't even think about it." she snapped, she held her free hand, palm out between them. Although she was crying, it was clear that comfort was not what she wanted, "Don't you dare! My daughter is lying in there!" she pointed with her wand, "Paralyzed. Do you hear me? PARALYZED!" She screamed the word so that it echoed from the stone ceiling.
Harry heard a collective noise of anguish from the boys at the end of the room.

"For, Merlin only knows, how long! I WILL have my say. Against my better judgment, I have listened to you about Ginny! I have listened to you about that diary! Try to tell me, now, that Dark Objects don't leave traces. Just try! Don't tell me what happened, last year, doesn't have something to do with this. And then, those floating horrors, out there!" she pointed to the window, "Have already been responsible for one death! And you and the Ministry allow them to stay there? Are you all mad? The children are all already depressed. What are you trying to do? Drive them all over the edge?"

"Molly, the Ministry..." Albus began, placatingly

"Bollocks!" she barked, "You and your chess games and your power plays. You cozy up when it suits you, and do as you please when it doesn't! I have had enough!"

"But, Sirius Black..."

Mrs. Weasley actually cackled, "Oh, yes." Her voice was high pitched, almost hysterical, "Yes, I suppose I was quite worried about that. Until I found out that Harry had been half killed by those bloody Muggles YOU sent him to. Remember Albus, I saw that report. Broken bones? Malnutrition? Head injuries? To say nothing of what I saw last summer."

Harry didn't think Mrs. Weasley remembered the rest of them were there, so beside herself was she, about Ginny. He never wanted his invisibility cloak more in his life, than at that moment.

She put her wand hand on her hip, gestured wildly with the other, "Oh, but there again! I'm just an over protective mother with no understanding of Muggle culture! Perhaps, it's just normal to lock your children up and feed them once a day, through a cat flap! And, of course, my sons..." She gave Fred and George a glance, waving her hand towards them "Well, they'd say anything to save themselves a bit of bother, wouldn't they? Tell me, Albus? When have the ever made up such a story to get out of trouble? hmm?"

She didn't seem to want an answer, as she went on, "Never! That's when! It's always been 'Fair cop, we're caught, moving on'. So, why would they make that up? Tell me?"

She paused for breath, but Dumbledore made no attempt to speak, this time. Whether out of anger, shame, or some other reason, Harry couldn't tell. He looked terribly old, and tired.

"With all that's going on, I can well imagine Dementors floating around are doing Harry's well-being a load of good, as well. I've had some interesting words with Remus, while we're on the subject."

It took Harry a moment to realize whom she was referring to, when she said "Remus". What had Professor Lupin been telling Mrs. Weasley?

Mrs. Weasley took a few steps towards Dumbledore, until they were merely a few steps apart, "You," she held her wand in her fist now, and gestured with it, pointing it at his chest, "Might wish to ask him the significance of a certain number of drawings and artifacts, in his possession. And, to see the photographs of a certain broom cupboard."

Harry was nearly sick, on the spot. Did Mrs. Weasley mean what Harry thought she meant?

Mrs. Weasley took a deep breath, her voice trembled with the effort of getting herself under control, "I am going to have a cup of tea, and wait for the healers to be done with my daughter. And you," she took a step forward, "Will not," another step, "Speak." one more step "To me." She finished with a deadly whisper, her eyes blazing, standing on her toes to get right up into the tall man's face.
She smoothed her red hair back, over her shoulder. With great dignity, she put her wand away, pushed him out of her way and went to join her sons. She sat down next to Percy, who had returned to his seat on a settee someone had conjured. Ron shoved a cup of tea into her shaking hand.

The fireplace flared again and Mr. Weasley stepped out. Mrs. Weasley gave him a venomous look and turned away.

The boys looked between their parents. Mr. Weasley gave his sons a little nod toward their mother. Mr. Weasley hurried down to talk to Dumbledore.

"I take it your wife is not pleased with you either, Arthur?" said Dumbledore, heavily.

Mr. Weasley was very pale and his eyes were shadowed, "No," he said shortly, apparently not wanting to spend time discussing it, "Has she seen Ginny yet?"

"Yes. The healers are with Ginny right now," said Dumbledore, "Perhaps, you and I should withdraw to Poppy's office, for a few minutes, until you can see her?"

Mrs. Weasley seemed to be keeping one eye on her husband, even as she drank her tea, "Ah. No. I'd better stay here." Mr. Weasley said, firmly.

Dumbledore nodded, "Well, it might be wise for me to withdraw. I'll just be in Poppy's office." Dumbledore walked out of the room and closed Madam Pomfrey's office door behind him, with a quiet snap.

Now that Dumbledore was gone, Harry reckoned he could just slip out the door, back to Gryffindor Tower. The headmaster would have said, if he wanted anymore information. He really was a bit of an intruder here, and the truth was, they wouldn't notice if he were gone.

Before, Harry could move, Mr. Weasley spotted him, sitting curled up, knees to chest, on the window seat. Mr. Weasley glanced at the little group around his wife, then sat down beside Harry, "Hello, Harry. You all right, are you?" he asked gently.

"Hi, Mr. Weasley." Harry said, "I'm okay." he shrugged.

"Harry? What happened? We got a very confused story from Dumbledore's message. But he said it was a potions accident. That you and Ron went to get Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey."

Harry sighed, telling the story as best he could.

"So, what is it Hermione and Marion were doing?" Mr. Weasley asked, when Harry described arriving at the common room with Snape.

"It's called CPR. I don't remember what the letters stand for. They do it on the television all the time, but I've never seen anyone do it for real." replied Harry.

"What's it for?" asked Mr. Weasley, seriously.

"It...well, when somebody stops breathing, I think it's supposed to make them start again." said Harry, uncertainly, "Hermione was breathing for her."

"She stopped breathing?" whispered Mr. Weasley, "And Hermione did a Muggle thing to make her start again?"

Harry nodded solemnly.
Mr. Weasly looked thunderstruck, "I love Muggles." he whispered, fervently.

"And then, Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall...They did...something," Harry tried to remember what Pomfrey had called it, "Madam Pomfrey called it, 'Tribu Oveeta'? Anyway, they've been pretty out of it every since."

Mr. Weasley seemed to mutter the syllables Harry had given him in a few different ways, "Do you mean 'Tribuo Vita'?

"That sounds right," Harry nodded.

"Professor Snape, Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall?" Mr. Weasley was looking paler than ever. He seemed to be keeping himself under control, with an effort.

"Yeah. It was just Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape first. Professor Snape said something about he was going to do it alone, but then Professor McGonagal...Mr. Weasley?" said Harry in alarm. The man had burst into tears.

"Sorry, Harry." gasped Mr. Weasly, wiping his face, taking a deep breath, "I..."

Mrs. Weasley must have heard him. She came hurrying down the room. "Arthur. Come have some tea," she said sharply, "You can't do anything, working yourself into a state. You come along too, Harry. You'll catch your death..." she stumbled over the word, "sat there."

Mr. Weasley put his hand around Harry's shoulders and urged him up. Leaving it there until they were both sat by Mrs. Weasley, who handed each of them a cup of tea.

Fred and George were sat on the floor now. Marian had gone to lay down on one of the beds. Percy and Ron were sitting in the two wing chairs. All of them were staring into their tea cups. They looked up when Harry and Mr. Weasley sat down.

"Molly? Did they tell you what happened yet?" Mr. Weasley asked her.

She shook her head, "I was just...just getting my bearings."

Mr. Weasley jerked his head at the sleeping figures of the two teachers and the medi-witch, "Molly...they used Tribuo Vita."

Mrs. Weasley dropped her cup.

"What does that mean?" asked one of the boys, in a small voice. They all stared at Mrs. Weasley's frightened face.

"It means," said Mrs. Weasley softly, "Your sister was dead."

"But...Magic can't bring back the dead." Percy said in a breathless whisper.

Mrs. Weasley shook her head, "No. I-I didn't mean...I don't mean all the way dead. I don't mean she was really gone. Her...I don't know...her magic was still there. Her brain was still alive. Her soul hadn't fled yet? It only works if her magic is still there. They gave a bit of their magic...their souls? To her." She glanced at the sleeping figures, "They're going to feel pretty poorly, for a while."

Ron nodded, "That's what Snape said to Hermione."

Harry was impressed that Ron had been paying attention. Harry had almost forgotten that Snape said that, "They'll be better though?" asked Harry.
"Yes. Of course." said Mr. Weasley, "It's just...it's not a spell that's used very often. I'm glad they were able to complete the triad."

"Professor Snape told Madam Pomfrey he'd do it himself, if he had to." said Ron.

Fred, George and Percy all nodded, "I thought he was going to." said George (or maybe it was Fred), "It was like he was all set to do an incantation before McGonagal said she could help."

"What would have happened?" asked Percy.

"I'm not sure." said Mrs. Weasley, pensively. She waved her wand and her cup returned to her hand.

"Er, excuse me?" A woman with a thick pony tail, looking very out of place, dressed in jeans, a thick winter jacket and boots was knocking on the open hospital wing door. "I'm sorry," she said, nervously, "Professor Flitwick said, this was where I'd find Professor Dumbledore?"

They looked at her, a bit confused, "Yes, of course. Percy, go tell Professor Dumbledore that someone's looking for him." said Mr. Weasley, tiredly.

Before Percy could get up, the woman said, "Actually, I'm looking for Hermione. Professor Flitwick said there had been an accident and she was asking for me?"

Mr. Weasley jumped up, "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Granger." he reached out to take her hand. "It's been a long night, I didn't recognize you, for the minute. You'll have to forgive me. Please, come and sit down." Harry hastily made room for her.

"Er, It's fine, thank you." she said, a little primly. Another time, Harry might have smiled at the strong resemblance to Hermione, "Professor Flitwick seems to have gotten called away rather hastily. I-I'm still not sure what's happened. Can somebody explain?"

"Where's Hermione, boys?" asked Mrs. Weasley, softly.

"One of the healers took her over there." said Harry, pointing to the screen on the other side from where Ginny was.

"I'll go get the healer, shall I?" said Mr. Weasley, getting up.

"Mrs. Granger," said Mrs. Weasley, "From what I understand, Your daughter helped save my daughter's life, tonight."

"I'm sorry?" asked Mrs. Granger.

"What was it she and Marion did?" one of the twins asked Harry, "It was some Muggle thing."

"CPR." said Harry.

"Yeah," said Ron, hoarsely "But me and Harry, we wouldn't have even figured out that there was anything was wrong with Ginny until she'd keeled over if it wasn't for her. She'd already told me to go get Pomfrey before Ginny even hit the floor."

Harry nodded, "She told me to go fetch Snape. Told me it was a potion, before I even figured out what to think

"But...What happened?" gasped Mrs. Granger.

"My daughter had a...mishap...with a potion. An overdose." Mrs. Weasley, said softly,
"Hermione...whatever she did...she's one reason Ginny's still alive."

Mrs. Granger leaned forward to place her hand on Mrs. Weasley's, "Oh, I'm so sorry." she said softly, "But, where's Hermione?"

The healer came forward with Mr. Weasley, "Mrs. Granger?"

"Yes?" she turned.

"I'm one of the healer's from St. Mungo's. That's the Wizarding Hospital. I'm looking after your daughter at the moment. It seems that she ingested some of the potion Miss Weasley overdosed on."

"How?" demand the woman, looking affronted.

"Well, Miss Weasley suffered an arrest and your daughter started CPR. Miss Weasley vomited. The potion is one that is absorbed fairly easily." Harry wondered if the healer was Muggle born or Muggle trained because she didn't seem to have a problem with the term "CPR".

"Is that dangerous?" Mrs. Granger gasped, starting to her feet.

"Not enough to be dangerous, but...it's usually, an anti-anxiety type potion. When I give her an antidote, she's likely to have a strong reaction. We felt she'd do better if you were here." the healer replied, gently.

"Can I see her?"

The healer nodded, "Yes, of course, right away. I'd like to give her the antidote, as soon as possible. The longer we wait, the more upset she'll be when, she gets the antidote." the healer gestured, "If you'll come this way."

Mrs. Weasley clasped Mrs. Granger's hand before she went to Hermione. In a throaty voice she said, "Thank you, Mrs. Granger."

"Molly?" called Professor Sprout, "Why don't you and Arthur come see Ginny, now, for a few minutes?"

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried down the long room.

With all the adults gone, the boys just sat, staring into their cups of tea or into the fire, not speaking. They still didn't really understand what was wrong with Ginny. There was so little sound from behind either screen that they knew silencing charms had been used on both.

A flash of silver light flew past them, through the door of Madam Pomfrey's office. A second later, Professor Dumbledore emerged, his wand in his hand, walking purposefully towards the little group. He stopped to take in the boys (Marion still slept on one of the beds), as they stared at him. He seemed to be counting heads. The set of his shoulders relaxed, minutely, as his eyes fell on Harry.

"Mr. Weasley?" he asked Ron, who was closest, "Where is your father?"

"With Ginny, sir." said Ron.

Dumbledore strode down there, had an apparently urgent word with Mr Weasley, then he resumed his original path out of the hospital wing, stopping for a second to say, "There's yet another crisis that calls me away. I need you all to remain here, until I return." as he left, he closed the door behind him and they heard the unmistakable sound of a locking spell being cast.
The way Harry describes CPR to Mr. Weasley is *not accurate*. But remember, he's thirteen here and has only ever seen it on television.

CPR helps maintain oxygen to the brain until treatment can be given that can (in about 2% of cases) restore the heartbeat. In this case a magical treatment.

Mrs. Weasley was correct, Ginny was "dead" (without respiration or pulse). One only ever does CPR on dead (pulseless, apneic or without enough respiration and heartbeat to sustain life) people. The people they bring back with CPR and resuscitation techniques are only "mostly dead", however. In the words of Miracle Max from The Princess Bride "There is a big difference between 'mostly dead' (clinically dead) and 'all dead' (brain dead). 'Mostly dead' also means 'sorta alive' ".

Also, the CPR guidelines in 1993 when this story takes place had the ratio of compressions to breaths in two person CPR at 15:2
Chapter Summary

In which someone else gives Dumbledore a piece of their mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The view from the Astronomy tower was astonishing tonight. He could see the distant lights of Hogsmeade and the sky was moonless and clear.

Somehow, Severus took solace in the fact that the last thing he’d ever see was something beautiful.

He pointed his wand at his left wrist. "Sectumsempra"

His wand clattered to the ground, as bright blue pain flashed up his arm and he clutched at it involuntarily. He fell to his knees, a scarlet gush spraying over his face and clothes. His spell was so much more efficient than a knife, cutting down through vein, tendon and ligament right to the artery.

It won’t be long, it won’t be long, he thought, in time to his heart beat.

He curled up around his forearm on his knees, breathed through the hurting the way he did after his dad got finished with him. This time though, his magic wouldn’t start clotting the blood or closing the cut.

He’d created this spell himself; a jinx to prevent the recipient's magic from joining the tissues. It had started out as something of theoretical challenge. He’d created it and its' counter just to see if he could (or so he told himself). Since his mother had gotten so sick and started drifting away from him, his thoughts had turned more and more to the practical application.

What sort of future did he have? He was a half-blood bastard (the Prince relatives had never accepted his mother's marriage), with no name, no prospects, no money, no position. He’d be lucky if he could get a job as a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron.

The pain was fading a bit. He recognized the first signs of shock. A little cold, his heart rate speeding up to compensate for the loss of blood. He smiled at himself, surprised that he remembered that much from the potions essay he did for Slughorn last week on remedies for splinching.

He scooted over to the wall, leaning his back against it, staring idly at the growing pool of blood.

So, for splinching: Dittany to close bleeding wounds. Skelegrow for if a bone has been splinched or vanished completely. Comfrey to reattach muscle. For shock...

Severus couldn't remember more. He turned his face upward. The stars overhead were very pretty.

"Severus!"

"Mr. Snape!"
Two female voices called, sharply, "Sev? Severus! I found your note!" Lily was weeping as she spoke, "What have you done?"

Severus found that a languorous tiredness prevented him from answering. He merely stared at them both, a little stupidly.

"Drink this," Madam Pomfrey held a vial to his lips and he swallowed, "Good lad." she whispered.

No one had called him a good lad since his mother had stopped speaking.

Severus woke with a gasp, staring at the ceiling of the hospital wing. He almost expected to lift his head and see Lily sitting at his bedside. With that worried expression she'd had all those years ago. They'd been...what? Fourth year?

It was still very dark. He heard people moving around, speaking in hushed voices but everyone he could see was sleeping. He shut his eyes again.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this." Severus' voice was almost pleading. They stood in the front room of his house on Spinner's End. A single candle on the table provided a pale, shivering pool of light. "I wasn't supposed to have anything to do with it. And he's the bloody picture of Potter. I told you: use three hairs. What did you do? Throw the man's hairbrush into the cauldron?"

Lily stood in front of the window with her arms crossed, looking out on the dark street. She wore simple white robes, her red hair unbound down her back. Severus could see her face in the window, as in a mirror. She smiled at him gently, in the reflection, "I know, he looks like his daddy but he's just like his father, Sev." she said, quietly.

Severus threw himself into his chair, "Lily, please, you don't know what you're asking."

"I do, Sev. You're all he's got left." Her reflected face was very pale and serious.

Lily started to turn around. Severus was unaccountably terrified of seeing her face, of meeting her eyes, unobstructed and unmediated.

He leapt out of the chair, throwing his wand hand between them. He turned his face away, surprised to discover that he brandished a sword rather than a wand.

This time, Severus sat bolt upright, feeling like he wanted to be sick. He was trembling, like he used to after dreams of the Dark Lord.

"Are you all right?" Molly Weasley sat in a rocking chair not too far away, knitting.

"Fine, thank you." Severus replied, hoarsely, with what he hoped was a dignified manner.

Mrs. Weasley jumped up, coming back with a cold glass of water. If it had been anyone else, if it had been any other time, he would have snapped at her, told her to leave him be. However, he was aware of how much Mrs Weasley was coping with, at the moment.

If he was too tired to snap, that was pure coincidence. He grunted his thanks, draining the glass in one long swallow.

"The healers said you should eat, if you woke." Mrs. Weasley said.

"What time is it?" he asked, ignoring her.

"Half-past five." She replied. She put the water glass on a side table, and came back with a plate of
scones, "Do you want tea or coffee?" she asked.

Severus just gave in, and took the plate from Mrs. Weasley. Settling on eating as the most expedient way to get her to leave him alone, "Tea, if it's made." he replied, looking around.

Most of the beds seemed to be occupied with sleeping people. Potter was sleeping in the one next to him.

"How is your daughter?" asked Severus, formally, accepting a cup of tea from her and handing back the now-empty plate. He'd eaten everything on it, without tasting it.

Mrs. Weasley sighed, "As well as can be expected. The healers sent me out here, for a bit. They needed to do some more charms...so they said. It may be that they thought, if they sent me out here, I'd sleep." she snorted at the unlikeliness of that notion, "They said I could go in again, in a few hours."

Severus nodded, "At least one of the charms they need to do is fairly intricate. It would require an hour or two." If they were going to be able to care for the child's body, until she regained muscle control, they needed a better way of feeding her than simply spelling potions into her stomach. They also couldn't just spell waste products out of her body. They'd run the risk of removing bits of her.

Severus swung his legs over the side of the bed. After a moment he stood up, gingerly.

"Do you need help, Professor?" asked Mrs. Weasley, solicitously.

Severus shook his head. He grabbed his stick and began to stagger to the bathroom.

Mrs. Weasley was at his arm, immediately. She never said a word, which was just as well; Severus wouldn't have had a civil thing to say to her. She steadied him as he hobbled on shaking legs, standing outside the bathroom waiting for him.

He wanted nothing more than to drag himself back to his quarters, take an hour long shower and crawl into his bed. Dumbledore could get one of his seventh years to supervise his classes today or else the old codger could teach them his damned self.

"Professor Snape?" Mrs. Weasley said softly as she led him back to his bed, "You should know. There was something of a disturbance in the castle last night. More than," she hesitated, "Ginny, that is."

Severus felt the pressure against his ears, of a silencio. Mrs. Weasley must have just cast it around herself. Severus did not like her ominous tone, "Oh?"

"It seems that Sirius Black broke into Gryffindor Tower." she said, grimly.

It had not been often in Severus' life that he was struck speechless. He sat down on the bed, staring at Mrs. Weasley.

She glanced at Potter's sleeping figure and pulled one of the infirmary's screens between his bed and Severus'.

"I think Harry would be dead, if he hadn't been here." she said, her voice the calm of someone who had already been frantic with fear, and had now run out of adrenaline, "Seamus and Dean said that they had just gone to bed, after all the excitement, you know. Well, Ron's been keeping the door locked because of Hermione's cat chasing his rat. Dean thought he heard someone cast an Alohomora. He thought it was Ron or Harry coming back, and they were being really quiet, so he
didn't think anything of it.

Well then, whoever-it-was just kept moving around, Dean said. And then he realized whoever-it-was was too skinny to be Ron and too tall to be Harry. And then he started tearing the dorm up," Mrs. Weasley shuddered, "Both the boys said that he was pulling the beds apart and he started yelling, 'Where are you, you little bastard?''

Severus felt for his wand, in the pocket of his robe, "Did Black hurt anyone?"

"He didn't hurt any people." sighed Mrs. Weasley, "Seamus and Dean said that Harry's dog showed up in the middle of everything, snapping and growling and barking. I think that dog saved those boy's lives, last night." she took something out of her pocket, "The portraits say the dog seemed like it was chasing something, but they couldn't see what. Chased it right out of Gryffindor Tower, down that dead end corridor on the third floor. Dumbledore's wondering if Black has an invisibility cloak. That wouldn't affect a dog so much. And then...and then maybe Black used one of his old tricks. We're not exactly sure what he did. There's no portraits in that hallway. We haven't found the dog but we found this." Mrs. Weasley held out a broken, blood stained collar, "We haven't told him yet."

Severus stared, "Dammit." For some reason, this turned his stomach more than anything else in the last twenty four hours, "Where's Dumbledore now?"

"He went to have an hour." said Mrs. Weasley, "The Aurors are meeting with him at eight. There's talk of sending the children home, until the wards can be renewed on the castle." She glanced at the screen that hid her daughter, "I imagine the Prophet will want a statement, from us. There'll be no keeping this quiet and I'd rather tell them something than have them make something up."

"In my opinion," Severus grated, "Your daughter's actions can be laid directly at the feet of the Ministry their recklessness, leaving the Dementors here. And now, we discover they can't even be trusted to keep Black out of the castle."

Mrs. Weasley looked at Severus steadily, "The healers believe she made a mistake with the potion and didn't mean to make it toxic. That she was merely trying to brew a Draught of Peace."

"She was distressed. It was an easy mistake to make." replied Severus, shrugging.

"Ginny has always been a good cook." Mrs. Weasley's eyes were sad, "And her potions marks were rather good last year, even with everything that happened."

Severus sighed, "I don't think it would be to anyone's advantage to have your daughter painted as mentally unstable. Poppy knows several good mind healers who are both skilled and discreet. I would ask her for their names."

"Thank you, Professor." Mrs. Weasley said softly, "For everything."

He nodded, wishing fervently she'd go away now. He felt very uncomfortable with her gratitude.

"Professor?" Mrs. Weasley, "I've been wanting to tell you something. I know it's not a good time, but...

Severus controlled another sigh, with effort, "Yes?"

"I thought you should know; when Arthur and I were first married, his mother told us that we shouldn't become too concerned, if we were to have a dark haired child. She wouldn't have said anything about it, if Arthur hadn't married a redhead." Unconsciously, it seemed, Mrs Weasley tugged on a trailing strand of her hair, "She said, if we had a dark haired child, we should just do a
hair coloring charm so people wouldn't talk. It was because of what she did, you see." Mrs. Weasley 
looked at Severus intently, as if to make sure he took her meaning, "She was worried that the dark 
hair would come out in a grandchild. She didn't want me to be suspect." Mrs. Weasley smiled, a little 
crookedly, "If there's anything we can do for you and Harry, just ask."

Severus nodded, gravely. That would explain all the Weasley children.

He decided it was time for a change of topic, "Tell the headmaster, he can find me in my quarters. I'll 
want to talk to him about what to do about this latest..." he paused, "Development." he said harshly. 

Mrs. Weasley nodded, and insisted on helping him hobble to the floo.

Two hours, three Pepper-ups and a long shower later, Severus was summoned to Dumbledore's 
office. Minerva and Poppy were there, looking similarly fragile and worn, along with Filius and 
Pomona.

This meeting was to be with Minister Fudge and Shacklebolt to discuss the Black situation, the 
Dementor situation and god only knew what else.

The heads of houses and Poppy were required, due to the Weasley girl's accident (to Severus' relief, 
the Ministry was seizing on that explanation like a drowning man).

Severus slumped in the squishy armchair the headmaster had conjured for him. Dumbledore rather 
proudly explained to the Minister what Minerva, Poppy and himself had done for Miss Weasley and 
that they were still a bit under the weather.

Minerva looked at Dumbledore sourly, but took the proffered chair. Severus noted there was none of 
their usual banter. Minerva must be furious.

Poppy was beyond furious. Severus had been on the receiving end of her rants about the Dementors, 
every time she had to ask him to brew her extra calming potions of various kinds.

Severus mind was wandering. Almost idly, Severus wondered if anyone had told Potter that Black 
had killed his dog. Severus refused to be the bearer of that little bit of bad news.

He really wasn't hearing whatever Fudge was yammering on about. He only tuned into the 
conversation when he heard the Minister say in a rather supercilious tone, "Well, it's understandable 
if certain students are a bit...fragile. I mean, little girl like that. Bound to be prone to nightmares. She 
was friends with Longbottom, after all. Poor soul. But you can't generalize from her that the rest of 
the students are, in any way, affected."

"Minister, I'm telling you, those creatures are wreaking havoc here after the Longbottom death. 
Perhaps, if it had never happened, we wouldn't be having these problems." Poppy tapped her finger 
on the arm of her chair as she spoke, "But I tell you, they're feeding off the general distress of the 
place. I have first years, in tears, in my office, every single day!" she finished.

"Oh, come now. Is that so unusual, in first years? I expect they're all Muggleborns, are they?" the 
Minister replied. in a patronizing tone.

"You know," Severus said, lazily, rousing himself a bit, "I'll have to ask Lucius if Draco's ever been 
prone to nightmares, before. Poor boy's been getting no sleep."

"Lucius?" asked the Minister, "Malfoy?"

"Mmm." said Severus, "His son's in my house. Terrible nightmares this year, I'm afraid. Affecting
his marks. And he's been getting quite thin."

Pomona started nodding, "You know, now that you mention it, one of mine went to see Poppy the other day because she hasn't been sleeping. Just went to pieces in your class didn't she, Severus?" she said, conversationally.

"Yes. Susan Bones, wasn't it?" replied Severus, contemplatively, "Generally, she's so level headed. She couldn't tell me why either. She just said she couldn't stop thinking about" Severus paused for effect, "Terrible things. Yes, I sent her to Poppy for some chocolate and a Dreamless Sleep."

Filius jumped in, "I've had to write to Davies' father. He's been very concerned about the letters he's been getting from the boy. Very concerned."

For the next few minutes the heads of houses discussed the students who had been reporting nightmares, insomnia, anxiety and depression. All Purebloods. All with influential parents. Fudge's eyes became wider and he began to sweat.

"But...without the Dementors...how will we catch Black?" whispered Fudge.

"That's not our problem," snapped Minerva, "Our problem is protecting this school. And, clearly, Dementors are unable to do it. My suggestion is that we renew the wards on Hogwarts. Although, what the board of governors will want to do after this latest..."

Severus didn't fail to notice that, though he said nothing, Kingsley Shacklebolt sat through this conversation with the slightest of smiles playing at the corners of his mouth.

Dumbledore sighed, "They have already contacted me. Apparently some of the students wrote their parents about the excitement, early this morning. They're holding an emergency meeting at noon. Several of them have spoken to me of a temporary closure, to do just what you suggest. After the attacks last year, the Longbottom affair, now Miss Weasley and Black breaking into the castle, they feel that the wards do indeed need renewing."

Severus rubbed his eyes, letting himself tune out the conversation. He leaned his head back in his chair, trying to decide what to do about Potter.

He remembered Lily's eyes from his dreams last night. What she had said to him. Really, there was only one decision.

Dimly, he heard Fudge taking his leave. He didn't bother to open his eyes to see him go.

"Severus?" Dumbledore said, with concern, "Are you all right?"

They were the only ones left in the office. Severus must have fallen asleep. He hadn't even heard the others leave.

He shook his head, trying to clear it, "No, I'm not bloody 'all right'." he growled, "How the hell did Black get in here?" he stood up. He'd be less likely to fall asleep, if he stood.

Plus, this was the type of conversation he preferred to have standing. Unfortunately, any advantage his height might give him in a confrontation was lost, with him still needing to lean heavily on a cane for support. Not that his height ever helped when he dealt with Dumbledore.

"I don't know." Dumbledore said, simply, looking up at him, "It is even more troubling that he did so last night, when almost all of Hogwarts' chief defenders were tied up in another emergency."
One of the requirements for the each of the heads of house, was to be a wizard powerful enough to hold the school against attack, if need be.

"Where was Lupin last night, anyway?" snapped Severus, too tired to even attempt tact. He wanted to pace but staggering back and forth would be entirely too undignified, "Are we sure he wasn't helping his old friend?"

Dumbledore looked at Severus, the set of his face not changing, but his voice becoming cooler, "It was the full moon last night. Remus was locked in his office. I set the wards myself and unlocked them half an hour ago. He was still asleep when I checked on him, so I haven't even informed him, yet." Dumbledore held Severus' eyes, until the younger man finally looked away.

"Have you had anything to eat?" asked Dumbledore, in a softer tone, "Poppy said the three of you would be quite tired, for some time yet."

"I'm fine." muttered Severus, "Molly Weasley makes it her mission in life to feed anyone who crosses her path."

Dumbledore smiled, "She does, doesn't she?" Then his face saddened, "I'm afraid I'm not in her good books, at the moment."

"Can't imagine why."

Dumbledore's eyes were hurt, "This has been a very bad term."

Severus straightened up, facing Dumbledore's desk directly. He placed both hands on his cane, "Headmaster, I'd like to officially request a few weeks leave. Especially, if the governors are planning to close to renew the wards." Severus said.

Dumbledore nodded, sagely, "Yes, of course, Severus. Poppy did say that the lion's share of the magic for Miss Weasley came from you. She'd actually suggested both you and Minerva take at least two weeks off. Were you planning to stay here, or perhaps you'd be better resting at home? Although it does seem that the castle is likely to be empty, resetting wards can be a noisy process."

"I intend to go to Spinner's End." replied Severus.

"In that case, we must decide what we're going to do with Harry and then..."

"Decide?" Severus asked, as though he were surprised "What is there to decide? I'm taking Potter with me." He said, before he could rethink it.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows going up. It wasn't often Severus had ever seen the headmaster wrong-footed

"Whether or not the board chooses to close the school until the wards are renewed, I'm taking Potter away. We've already seen that Gryffindor Tower's not safe." Severus said in a rush. Dear god, what was he thinking? He was out of his mind, "I'm in no fit condition to teach, probably for a week or two at least, regardless. No one need know that Potter is with me. Even so, there are only two people in the Wizarding World who have ever known where my home is. One of them is dead."

"Severus, my thought was..." Dumbledore began.

"I don't care what you thought." snapped Severus, "This is not your decision. There is nowhere else. He cannot stay here. You will be too concerned with other matters to keep a watch on the boy. Minerva will be ill for weeks. The Weasleys have other problems. The Dursleys should never have
been an option even twelve years ago, clearly. Don't even try to tell me that Lupin is on the list." His voice was rising in volume. He held up a hand to forestall Dumbledore, when he looked as though he might speak, "And, it is not your decision. I will not have you interfering in this. The boy is nearly unreachable! Have you noticed? He doesn't sleep. He barely speaks. He only eats because I threaten him. Tell me, how did he react to the news that Black killed his familiar?"

"He was very stoic about it." said Dumbledore, with a hint of pride.

"That's normal in a thirteen year old, is it?" demanded Severus, exasperated, "Do you want him to be the next one to brew himself a lethal potion?"

"Severus, I think you exaggerate." Dumbledore waved his hand, a little too airily for Severus' comfort, "The boy's a Gryffindor, they don't tend toward..."

"Such cowardly gestures?" Severus supplied, sarcastically, "Tell that to Ginny Weasley." he finished, coldly.

That got Dumbledore's attention, "But, the healers said it was an accident." He stared at Severus with narrowed eyes.

"I lied." Severus sat down again, feeling his legs tremble beneath him, "That child has an illicit lab somewhere. In it you will find not just the ingredients for the Peace Draught, but distilling equipment to reduce it. She finished it last night, under the moon, using the process intended for self-deliverance from a terminal illness."

"But, why..?" sputtered Dumbledore.

Severus considered Dumbledore for a long moment, "From what I could gather, the girl blames herself for Longbottom's death."

"All right," conceded the headmaster, "But we were discussing Harry. Why would he be in as much distress as you appear to believe?"

"Oh, I don't know, Dumbledore," sneered Severus, "Perhaps a lifetime of neglect might make one a trifle...tightly wound? Perhaps, a term where a schoolmate dies in an incident that closely mirrors one's own circumstance might be a slight bit...unpleasant? Perhaps, when all one's careful defenses come crashing down around one's ears, it can be a little upsetting?" Severus said, in his low deadly voice.

"Who are we speaking of here, Severus? Harry, or yourself?" Dumbledore asked, softly.

Severus did not dignify that with an answer. It would not do to lose his job through swearing at the man.

They both looked at each other steadily. This time, Dumbledore was the first to look away.

The headmaster stood to look out of his window, "So, taking him away from his friends is the answer?" challenged Dumbledore, clearly looking for an objection.

Yes, that was a problem, but Severus couldn't think of any better answer, "He needs to get away from those damned Dementors, first off. At least at Spinner's End, he'll be safe from both Black and Dementors." And then, maybe, Lily would stop looking at Severus with those damned accusing eyes in his dreams every night.

"Perhaps Minerva..."
"Aren't you listening?" growled Severus, "The boy is not a chess piece to move as you see fit. He is not yours at all. If your goal is to maintain influence over the child, to be perfectly honest, Minerva is no happier with you than I am."

"Severus, I just cannot imagine that you, with your history with the child..." Dumbledore turned to gaze at Severus with mournful reproach.

"Oh, for god's sake, Dumbledore, I can hardly do worse than Petunia!" Severus struggled to his feet, "And, as I have said before, legally speaking." He emphasised the word "legally" "You have no say in this. You can, of course, deny me leave. Even sack me, if you like. But I am taking my child, and going home. Today."

Chapter End Notes

A little explanation, since people ask:

What Molly's trying to explain to Severus is that her mother-in-law used the Occludus Paternus potion to conceive Arthur. Arthur's *named* father has red hair, but his *biological* father (a Muggle-born) has dark hair. Arthur's mother wasn't sure if Arthur's hair was red genetically or magically.

This wouldn't be a problem, except that Molly's hair is also red, so if Arthur's hair was *magically* red but *genetically* dark, there was a chance that one of his children could have dark hair.

As Molly understands it, red hair is a recessive gene, and two people with red hair cannot produce a child with dark hair, so if that happened, it would look like Molly had been screwing around. It is, of course, more complicated, but this is how the Wizarding World sees it.

No one is entirely sure how deep the changes are from the Occludus Potion. Some authorities even argue that proximity to the "named" father helps to cement the changes in the child. For whatever reason, Molly and Arthur have never had a problem.

Before this, Weasley line was dying out. The elder Mr. Weasley was "The last scion of a dying house." Unlike James, the elder Mr. Weasley was aware of his infertility, and the arrangement was made with his permission-so no, Molly's mother in law wasn't "cheating."

Wizarding inheritance law is based in the 16-17th Century. Certainly no later than the 18th. Who the child resembles and who is named as the father is as important as who the child's actual blood relatives are. Any time people start talking about "Purity of blood" they are talking trash because with humans it's a bad thing...witness the Pure Blood Blight and all the trouble it's causing here (I won't even talk about actual genetic diseases you see in closed populations).

The Weasley line no longer suffers from the Pure Blood Blight. This is why there are so darn many Weasleys.

If Molly seems a little unclear, it's because she's been up all night and she's never, ever spoken about this to anyone else.
In which Snape takes Harry home and we meet the Dursleys once again.

Adults bustling about the hospital wing woke Harry the next morning, long before he generally got up for class. Someone had brought up breakfast for everybody and set up a table where the settee and chairs had been the night before.

However, before Harry could even think about breakfast, a grave looking Dumbledore had taken Harry aside, to break the news than Snuffles had gone missing. Well, the headmaster said the dog had disappeared after chasing Sirius Black out of Gryffindor, anyway, "I'm afraid he's gone for good." were the headmaster's exact words.

Harry stared at him, not knowing how to respond. "Harry?" asked Dumbledore, quietly, "Are you all right?"

In the end, Harry just nodded. It was just a dog, after all. No point in getting upset, not really. His eyes prickled, but there were much bigger things to worry about. Anyway, Snuffles was bound to turn back up, he always had before.

The headmaster patted Harry on the shoulder, "There's a brave lad." he said, in an approving voice.

The rest of the morning seemed to pass in a numb haze. Everyone seemed to be terribly interested in Sirius Black breaking into the castle. Somehow, Harry just couldn't feel that excited about it. He was glad that Dean and Seamus were safe, but honestly, otherwise Harry was more worried about Snuffles.

Harry managed a few bites of the toast that someone (maybe McGonagal?) put in front of him. It was hard to eat around the heaviness in his chest.

Mrs. Weasley came out to tell them that they could see Ginny for a few minutes, "She can't move, mind, but that'll pass," Mrs. Weasley said, "She can hear you, and the healer's say she's not in any pain. We just have to look after her 'till she's better. You can't stay long, because she'll get tired."

It was a bit like talking to Hermione last year, when she'd been petrified, except that Ginny's eyes were alive and they could see she was hurting behind them.

Harry was selfishly glad that the healers wouldn't let them stay more than about five minutes. Perhaps tomorrow he'd be better able to cope. Today, all he could manage was sitting at the side of her bed and giving her hand a quick squeeze. In some ways, he was the best off of the lot. Hermione was trying very hard not to cry and Ron couldn't seem to get near the bed. Mrs. Weasley sat on the other side of the bed, brushing Ginny's hair. Mrs. Weasley was talking, but she didn't seem to expect anyone to answer her. Nonetheless, it was terribly awkward.

As they left her, McGonagal cornered Harry, before he could leave, "Harry? I need a word" she said tiredly.

Harry stopped, arranging his face into what he hoped was a politely expectant expression. He really
just wished she'd go away and leave him alone. He was tired and just wanted to go back to bed. Failing that, he wanted to get to a class where he could pretend to be taking notes so no one would bother him.

She started speaking, but he really didn't take it in. Assuming he was following her correctly, she told him that Snape was taking him "home". She'd nattered on, at length, about how the board of governors were planning on closing the school to renew the wards; that Harry needed to go somewhere safe; that no one else wanted him and Snape was stuck with him.

Perhaps those weren't her exact words, but that was what she meant.

She said something about being sorry that his familiar had died. Where had she gotten that idea? People seemed to be saying a lot of things this morning, that he wasn't quite able to catch.

It didn't matter. All was as Harry had predicted. If Harry could summon enough energy, he might be angry.

Harry hurried to catch up to Ron and Hermione, who were headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

"It's all right," Ron said, as soon as Harry told him what McGonagal had said, "When Ginny's a bit better, my parents'll want to have you at the Burrow."

Harry smiled, but he knew Ron was being overly optimistic. Harry's luck just didn't run that way. Ginny looked like she could take months to get better. Harry would only be in the way.

"I'll send you a letter, if you send Hedwig to find me," said Hermione, bracingly, "I'm leaving this morning too. My mum wants me to pack up some things. She wants to take me home as soon as she can." she gave them both a quick hug and scampered up the stairs to the girl's dorms.

Harry didn't even had time to pack. McGonagal told him someone was doing it for him and Snape was having everything sent. She told him Snape said just to put a few things he'd need for today into a bag.

She also mentioned that Snape said he should dress for Muggle London. So, he threw on a pair of jeans, a sweater and trainers. Fortunately, these items had been among the extra clothing Snape had seen fit to buy him when they went to Hogsmeade, complaining that he wouldn't have Harry slouching around in clothes fit for Filch's rag bag on weekends. Harry hesitated over his invisibility cloak, then tucked it into his book bag. He threw on his winter cloak, not having anything else for the cold.

He met Snape in the entrance hall, with Hedwig in her cage, but Snape said, "I think your owl will not be comfortable, with the transportation we intend to use."

Harry's heart dropped, "We'll have to leave her here, sir?" he asked, dully. Bad enough that they hadn't found Snuffles yet, but now he'd have to leave Hedwig behind?

Snape shook his head. He snapped open Hedwig's cage, holding out his arm. With remarkable docility, she climbed up onto it. The older wizard brought her up close to his face and whispered in her ear.

She nipped at his fingers affectionately, as if she actually liked the man. Curiously, something like a smile tugged at one corner of Snape's mouth. After a moment, Hedwig jumped to Harry's shoulder to tug on a bit of Harry's hair, then took off out of the open front door of the castle.

"Sir?" asked Harry, in surprise. The only person, other than Harry, that Hedwig was so friendly with
was Hagrid.

"She'll meet us there." said Snape, simply, "Oh, before I forget..." he drew his wand pointing it at Harry., "Hold still a moment, Potter." In his other hand Snape held an old fashioned fob watch. Harry felt a tingle of magic move over and through him. After a moment, Snape nodded sharply, snapped the cover of the watch shut and tucked it away in the breast pocket of his blazer. "Let me have your cloak."

Harry took it off and held it out.

"I have no idea what Muggle teenagers are wearing these days, so you'll have to make do." Snape sniffed, tapping it with his wand. The cloak transfigured into a black winter jacket, "I realize it's not precisely fashionable, but where we're going, it's best not to draw attention. It keeps the charms of your cloak."

Snape handed it back.

"Come along, then." he said, putting his wand away. He retrieved his cane from where it was leaning against the wall.

Harry nodded, and followed the man as he made his slow way out to a waiting carriage.

Since Dumbledore had broken the news to him about Snuffles disappearing this morning, Harry had felt as though a thick blanket of fuzz had wrapped around his brain. Nothing seemed very important, not even the knowledge that Snape was taking him away from Hogwarts. He wasn't even curious about where they were going.

A smattering of other students were also waiting for the train. The official word hadn't come down yet, but many parents were already calling their children home. It felt surreal to be standing on the platform, waiting for the Hogwarts Express, in a cold, late October drizzle. Not even Harry's charmed jacket kept out the chill.

Professor Snape stood beside Harry, not speaking. If he noticed Harry's discomfort, he gave no sign.

Harry was vaguely impressed that Professor Snape hadn't made any of the mistakes other wizards tended to make when dressing as Muggles. He actually looked quite respectable. Not like Uncle Vernon though. Rather than a businessman, he looked like a teacher at a posh school. He had a black overcoat over dark grey wool trousers, and a charcoal blazer over a black sweater. His long hair was neatly confined in a ponytail at the base of his neck. He leaned tiredly on the black cane, his sallow face taut and lined.

"Harry!" Hermione's voice called.

Harry turned to see she and Mrs. Granger hurrying to catch up. "I wasn't sure you were taking the train!" she said, "I'm so glad. It feels almost..." she trailed off turning a bit pink.

Harry smiled, it would make the trip less lonely, "Yeah, it feels almost normal," he said quietly, "Your mum in a hurry to get back?"

Hermione gave him a wan smile, "She's a little unnerved. Flitwick offered to apparate us back again, but she's afraid she'd leave her stomach behind for sure, this time."

Harry snorted. He could well imagine.

They didn't have much to say. Even when the train came and they climbed onto it, no one spoke
much. It had to be the most subdued ride Harry had ever taken. He and Hermione gave up trying to have a conversation after a while. Hermione sat next to him and read her book while Harry watched the countryside zoom by.

Mrs. Granger and Professor Snape had a long conversation about something called "TMJ" that Harry paid no attention to. Mrs. Granger gave the Professor a business card. Oddly, Snape appeared to give her one. Wizards had business cards? Fascinating.

Harry dozed for a bit, his head leaning against the window. He was still cold, and burrowed more deeply into his jacket. Little bits of conversation drifted over, "Yes, Dursley. That's the name...school right now, I understand...shouldn't be difficult. Already have one report on the books." That was Snape's voice.

Mrs. Granger's higher voice was easier to hear over the train's rumble, "So, where should I say I received the information?"

"Oh...volunteer...daughter's school..." Snape was facing the wrong direction.

"They won't want both children?"

It was frustrating to only hear half of what Snape was saying, "Arthur Weasley...made the file...notify them, the other one's already been taken into care...Find it's way back...sort of a Someone Else's Problem Charm..."

Harry slipped into a deeper sleep. The next thing he knew, Snape was poking him on the shoulder, "Potter? Wake up, we're there."

Harry sat up, rubbing his eyes. His neck hurt a bit, from where he'd been sleeping awkwardly against the window. He was even colder and felt as though he was still half asleep.

It was getting dark, as they headed into Muggle London. Harry kept close to Snape, not wanting to get separated as they walked to the parking lot.

"Oh, it's no trouble." Mrs. Granger was saying. "It's on our way,"

"I do appreciate it." Snape said graciously.

A man waved to them. Hermione gave a happy cry and waved back, hurrying to meet her father.

Mrs. Granger turned back to Snape, "So where in Surrey did you say we were going?"

"Little Whinging." Snape said, "I have the directions..."

Harry stopped dead, feeling like he'd received a physical blow. No one noticed he'd stopped, in the momentary flurry of introductions.

That fucking liar. That bloody fucking liar.

Snape was going to take him back.

Harry was aware that he'd backed up a step. He must have made a sound, because they all turned to look at him.

Vernon would kill him this time. There was no doubt in Harry's mind. None at all. The only question would be: how quickly and how painfully.
"I'm not going back." Harry's voice shook, "I'm not. I'll cut my own bloody throat before I go back."

Snape looked genuinely surprised for a moment, "Potter, what are you..? Didn't Minerva..?" He shook his head irritably, "No, obviously she didn't think to warn you. Neither did I."

"I'M NOT GOING BACK" roared Harry. He was breathing so hard he felt sick and dizzy. Black spots danced across his vision. He struggled to swallow down the threatening nausea.

Snape stepped forward. Harry kept moving back until his back was against the side of a car. Harry wanted to run, but his legs trembled as though they wouldn't hold his weight. His hands tingled as he clenched and unclenched them. They were slick with cold sweat as he steadied himself against the car.

Hermione darted to his side, "Harry, come on, calm down." she said, gently.

He bent over, put his hands on his thighs as he tried to get some control over his breathing. His vision was grey around the edges, "Fuck off, Hermione, you stup..." he growled.

"Oh, very good, Potter." cut in Snape, sarcastically, "And if your mouth doesn't drive her a sufficient distance away, will you lash out physically? No, given your stature, you'd be better to do it magically. I should warn you, I suspect that Miss Granger would best you in a duel."

"Bugger off. I'm not going back." Harry replied hoarsely, trying not to retch. He wrapped one arm around himself and braced one arm against the car. Unable to keep to his feet anymore, he slid down the car to the floor of the parking garage, sitting on the concrete. He bent forward, putting his head on his knees, the way the school nurse had shown him when he'd done this in school once (he'd heard Dudley and his gang were lying in wait for him).

That didn't seem to help much.

A wave of dizziness had him pulling his knees up under him. He knelt in a tight ball, his hands pressed flat to the floor, eyes tightly shut, not caring that tears were leaking from his eyes, just glad that he wasn't puking this time. Although, come to think of it, it would likely be just dry heaves. He hadn't so much as had a cup of tea since breakfast. Well, at least now Snape wouldn't be chasing him around about eating meals.

He heard Snape's low voice say something to the Grangers. He felt someone kneel down next to him. The back of a hand felt his forehead, his cheek, "You're cold as ice." Snape said, "Can you hear me?"

Harry nodded.

Snape's hand left his face, then settled on his upper back, just at the base of his neck. Harry tensed, waiting for the hand to grab the fabric of his clothes and haul him to his feet.

It didn't. Instead, it just rested there, "I'm not taking you back to the Dursley's. If you would rein in your panic for thirty seconds, Potter, I will explain." Snape's voice was very soft and very close.

"Y-you're lying." replied Harry. He understood, now, why the Dursleys always took him. They were well paid. So, they'd take him back, for however long it took. They'd make his life a living hell and this time they'd overstep. This time his magic wouldn't work and fix him in time. He knew that could happen now. That's what happened to Neville.

A mad hysteria threatened to break out into sobs. Harry stubbornly fought them down. Bad enough that everyone was watching an attack of his nervous stomach.
Harry wouldn't stay there. One way or another, Harry would get out.

"Do you need an Unbreakable Vow, Potter?" rasped Snape. Harry had no idea what he was talking about, "I daresay Granger is skilled enough to act as bonder."

"...no idea they were that bad." Harry heard Hermione say to someone, probably her mum. Now, Hermione really had reason for all the pitying looks she'd been sending his way all term.

Someone else settled down very close to him, but not touching, "Harry?" it was Hermione's mother, "Listen, Harry, Professor Snape's not taking you back to them. I won't let him. All right? He told me on the train, that he needs to get something called a portkey from someone."

"I believe you know Mrs. Figg?" asked Snape, "Since we really don't want the entire Wizarding World to be aware of your whereabouts, we planned to take you to Little Whinging first. Normally I would apparate from there. However, given current circumstances, it seems reasonable to travel by portkey. Dumbledore will have dropped it off with Mrs. Figg."

Harry didn't believe a word of it.

Nobody spoke after that. Harry could feel them communicating over his head, and heard a few whispers behind his back, but frankly didn't care. He waited for Snape to lose patience. Perhaps, he'd just give up this charade and call Uncle Vernon to get him to his feet and give him a clip around the ear.

The cold of the concrete was sinking into his legs, which were beginning to cramp.

"Can you manage to drink this, or must I spell it into you you?" growled Snaped, still far too close.

Harry turned his head to the side. Snape held out one of Pomfrey's vials of Pepper-ups.

Almost as quickly as the panic descended, it was ebbing. It didn't matter if he did go back to the Dursley's, Harry realized. He could get away from them, any time he wanted. He just had to have the will.

His trembling eased a bit. He pushed himself up from the ground. It was like this when this had happened before at primary school. Once it was over, it was over. It was embarrassing that it had to happen, in front of a load of people. That had never happened before.

"That's right, Harry." said Mrs. Granger, "Come on now, up you come."

Snape's hand moved around from the back of Harry's neck to his shoulder, "Dammit, Potter." Snape said, without inflection.

Harry began to stand, but the attempted movement from ground to upright threatened to send him pitching forward again. Snape steadied him, held the potion out. Harry took it meekly, rather hoping it was one of Snape's more potent poisons, at the moment.

After drinking it, the world became a little more solid around Harry, less likely to spin. Mrs. Granger helped him to his feet

Hermione's father handed Snape back his stick. Snape used it to lever himself up from the ground, "Did you actually remember to eat today, at all, Potter?"

Harry shrugged.
Snape muttered darkly to himself about "shock" and "should have realized" and "nobody having any sense" and "needing to do everything his bloody self" and "flipping Evases and their flipping eating" all the rest of the way to the Granger's car. He put his hand back on Harry's shoulder. Perhaps to balance himself. More likely, to prevent Harry from making a break for it.

Mr. Granger opened the back door, looking very worried. Hermione slid in the other side, so that Harry was effectively pinned in the back seat, between Snape and Hermione.

Harry couldn't meet Hermione's eyes. He put his head back on the back of the seat and stared fixedly at the ceiling.

Hermione's hand crept into his and squeezed. Harry's hand stayed limp.

Every turn they took was familiar. Harry just blanked his mind.

When the car finally stopped, he looked around cautiously. The were indeed on Magnolia Crescent, rather than Privet Drive.

"Come on, Potter." Snape said, wearily, "I'm very tired."

"Yes, sir." Harry, started to relax just the slightest bit. He also began to feel very stupid as he clambered out of the car.

"Oh, for the love of..." Snape growled, with feeling, as Harry shut the car door, "Oh, and naturally they see us. We just had to park under the bloody streetlight."

Harry stiffened as Snape put an arm around him, a gesture that would have seemed both friendly and intimate to any onlooker. Snape warned very softly, "Potter, stand right there. Don't move. Don't speak. And don't have another bleeding panic attack." Harry was trapped, with Snape on his left and the car on his right.

Harry was conscious that someone—it might have been Hermione—was standing behind him, leaning up against the car. Harry would be unable to bolt. Not that it mattered, Snape held him in an iron grip.

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were striding up the sidewalk, on their weekly night out, by the looks of it. Vernon was dressed in his second best suit and Petunia in her navy dress with the pearls. They recognized Snape and Harry as they drew closer.

Uncle Vernon's eyes bugged, Aunt Petunia hid herself behind Uncle Vernon's shoulder, clutching her bag to her chest. A nasty smile spread across Vernon's face, "So, got tired of him already, did you? Figured out we're the only ones who can handle him? My sister was on to something, then. Well, the price's gone up."

Harry grabbed at the side of the car, trying to keep from hyperventilating. Snape's hand tightened warningly on his shoulder. Harry noticed that Petunia was clutching Uncle Vernon's arm, "Vernon!" she hissed in his ear, "Vernon, stop." The similarity to his own position was almost funny.

"Don't be ridiculous." snapped Snape, in his most disdainful voice, all sign of weakness gone. Even the cane seemed an aristocratic affectation, "Mr. Potter and I are paying a social call on someone who lives nearby."

Vernon's eyes narrowed, "A social call? One of your lot lives here?"

"Oh, there are few places in the world where wizards don't live." replied Snape, with supreme
indifference, "You might want to remember that, when you begin your flight."

"Our what?" asked Petunia, in confusion.

"When you flee this area." said Snape, in apparent surprise, "Frankly, I'm surprised to find you still here."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Vernon, "Talk sense."

Snape didn't seem interested in speaking to Vernon, instead he directed all his comments to Harry's aunt. "You know Petunia, I understand your parents died some years ago. I was very sorry to hear that. Your mother was often kind to me. I was very sorry I was unable to offer my respects, at the time."

That seemed a very bizarre topic change to Harry. And...Snape knew his grandparents?

Aunt Petunia seemed to think so, too, "What do they have to do with anything?" she spat, "They've got nothing to do with you. And if you think that freak's getting any of my mother's things, you've got..."

Snape held up the hand that had been on Harry's shoulder, "I only wish to point out that you should think on their manner of death." he said, quietly.

Petunia's mouth twisted, "Some of your lot killed them. I got a letter. It was because of whatever She was involved in."

"Just so." nodded Snape, "It is not uncommon, in wizarding warfare, to go after families. The Wizarding World holds the bonds of blood and name most sacred, after all. And, after Lily was killed, did Dumbledore not explain that, by taking the boy, you would be completing protections your sister had set in motion by her sacrifice?" He sounded like he was teaching a class.

Harry was trying hard to follow Snape, but this was all brand new to him. The Minister had said something about wards the night he'd taken Harry back to the Dursleys when he'd run away.

"He said if we took him, this Voldemort's people couldn't get at him." she said grudgingly. She crossed her arms over her chest, "I didn't want to, but I did it. Much thanks I got from the ungrateful freak." she sniffed, casting Harry a disgusted look.

"Did it never occur to you that those wards protected you, as much as they protected the boy?" Snape inquired, in much the same tone he had been known to use when asking people why they had added a particularly explosive ingredient.

"I..." What Snape had just said finally seemed to penetrate Petunia's brain, "What?" she sputtered.

"I should think, if I were you, I'd be quite afraid right now." Snape said, silkily, "But, perhaps you, Petunia, are made of sterner stuff. You sister was a Gryffindor, after all.


Snape was gave Uncle Vernon a long look, "The slow painful death that most assuredly waits for you, if you are caught by wizards."

Vernon drew himself up to his full height, nearly matching Snape's. He raised his hand to point his finger at Snape's chest, stepping forward, until he and Snape were only a foot apart, "You can't threaten me. I won't be intimidated."
Harry tried to step back, but Snape's hand went around his shoulder. The warm weight of it was strangely calming.

"Threat?" asked Snape. Harry could hear the unpleasant smile in his voice, "No, this is friendly advice. One of the most dangerous dark wizards from the last war has escaped Azkaban and is searching for Mr. Potter."

"Azka- what?" Vernon blustered, "Nonsense!"

Petunia put both her hands over her mouth in horror.

Snape went on as if he hadn't been interrupted, "I should also point out, a great many of the Dark Lord's followers have escaped justice and would like nothing better than to revenge themselves upon the Boy Who Lived." He shrugged, "As I said, wizards hold the bonds of blood most sacred. I imagine killing you would seem like a way to get at him. The day you signed your rights over to me, those wards fell. I don't imagine it will take them long to find out."

Both Harry's Aunt and Uncle stared at Snape. Then Aunt Petunia fairly shrieked, "You never told us that! Dumbledore has to protect us. He said that Voldemort's people were all criminals! He said we'd have protection!"

"Oh, I don't think so, Tuney" Snape spat, maliciously, "Dumbledore and the Ministry have other problems, at the moment. While we're on the subject, I don't think you really want to attract the attention of the Ministry," Snape took his hand off of Harry's shoulder to draw out his wand, pointing it at Aunt Petunia.

Petunia gave a squeak and threw her hand in front of her face.

A roll of parchment appeared, unrolling itself in the air in front of Petunia "You see this?" Snape ground out, pointing with his wand, as if at the chalkboard in class, "This is a listing of the boy's injuries, received under your care. Concussions. Broken bones. Malnutrition. I doubt highly that you want any of the supporters of the Boy Who Lived to see this."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Aunt Petunia looked stricken. With a shaking hand she reached out to touch the long scroll, but did not take it, "He's a clumsy child...accidents...never ate as well as our Dudders...some children...don't know what he's been saying...he makes things up, probably because of his mother dying..."

"Don't you dare." Snape's dangerous voice cut her off, "Do not presume to imagine we don't have methods to get the truth. I know all about the cupboard." His voice dropped to a whisper, "And the rest. You need not fear Azkaban when this gets out, Tuney. Wizards who remember what Lily's sacrifice delivered us from will be here for their revenge."

"Will they kill us?" Petunia asked just as quietly. Uncle Vernon's face had turned the color of sour milk, all bluster run out of him.

"That's a very good question." said Snape, rhetorically. "You know, in cases like these, there are spells that can make you live through the boy's life for the last thirteen years." Snape nodded at the long scroll, "Examine your treatment of the boy and ask yourself: could you live through what you've doled out to him over the years? There would lie your answer."

Vernon was sweating in the cool night, "What are we going to do?" he demanded.

Snape waved his wand and the scroll disappeared, "If I were you, I'd run. I would go home tonight and I would pack everything I could comfortably carry into one bag. I would obtain the fastest..."
transport I could and I would run. Tonight. Chances are, the Death Eaters don't know the wards have fallen, so it is probably safe for you to track down a solicitor to sell your house and other assets. If it were me, I would turn every asset I had into the most liquid form of currency I could. And then I would run, and never stop."

"But we got shut of him." objected Vernon, "They can't blame us for keeping him now."

"You would have been better turning the child over to the Dark Lord's minions twelve years ago. Perhaps, they would have let you live. But they don't care for Muggles on the best of days. If you had cared for the boy properly, the Ministry and Dumbledore would have moved Heaven and Earth to protect you." Snape sighed in mock regret, "I fear you have chosen the worst of all possible courses. Every wizard you will ever meet will want to hurt you or kill you for your actions. Either for protecting the boy, or for harming him. I submit that your best chance is to be a moving target."
Snape paused to consider, "I understand that there are no wizards living on the American's Antarctic research station. Perhaps you could apply for work there." Snape put his hand back onto Harry's shoulder, "Go now, I am quite tired of speaking to you." Harry could feel the professor tremble with exhaustion

"But what about Dudley?" wailed Aunt Petunia.

"If you want your son to live," said Snape, softly, "You will abandon him. Tonight. Distance yourselves from him, and you may yet save his life."

"Professor Snape!" called a different voice, "What on earth are you doing, standing out there?"

Harry turned to see the little old lady who used to watch him for the Dursleys come hurrying down from her house.

"Don't stand out here all night! What's wrong with you? You know better! And you both look like death warmed over. Hello, Petunia, dear. Vernon." She took Snape's arm on one side and Harry's on the other and started urging them both toward her house, "Sorry, dears," she said, to the shell shocked Vernon and Petunia, "No time to talk."

Mrs. Granger hurried to Snape's side and whispered something to him, "Thank you, very much Mrs. Granger." Snape told her, perhaps a bit impatiently, but probably as polite as he could under the circumstances, "We'll be fine. One of us will give you a ring when we get settled."

Mrs. Granger smiled tightly, climbing back into the car, which started and pulled away.

The Dursley's were left under the streetlight, alone. Harry turned to take one last look at them. They stared at each other. Petunia choked out a few words that Harry didn't catch, and they both took off at a dead run towards Privet Dive. Aunt Petunia leaving her blue high heels lying under the street light.
Chapter Summary

In which Harry and Severus arrive at their home.

It was terribly unnerving for Remus, to emerge at lunchtime from his rooms, to discover a note from Dumbledore in his office telling him that his classes had been canceled for the day, rather than being covered by other teachers as had been agreed. Remus' paranoia spiked; he couldn't help but worry that perhaps his past indiscretions involving Black had come to light in some way. Surely, if Dumbledore were going to sack him, he would be waiting here to do it himself? Although, if that had happened, surely Aurors would be waiting here as well.

However, as he made his way to check in with Poppy in the hospital wing, he saw a great many of the students missing from the Great Hall and the corridors far too empty this time of day. A note on Minerva's classroom door confirmed that it wasn't just his classes that were cancelled, it was all of the classes. Remus didn't like to speculate on what that might mean.

If the corridors were too empty, the hospital wing was uncomfortably full. From the number of redheads, the entire Weasley clan had set up residence, along with a gaggle of healers from St. Mungo's. Remus saw at least three people wearing the uniform of St. Mungo's.

Poppy was nowhere to be seen and Pomona was having a conversation with one of the healers

Arthur Weasley looked up at Remus as he came in. Arthur was sitting in a chair next to a sleeping Molly, looking a lot like Remus felt. Molly was sound asleep on one of the hospital beds, curled up in her cloak.

Arthur saw Remus come in and gave him a tired wave and a half hearted smile.

Bill Weasley, the oldest Weasley boy was there with him, having a serious conversation with his father and another stocky redhead who strongly resembled Molly. Remus recognized Bill from some freelance work he'd done for Gringott's, a few years back. It could only be a family emergency that would bring him here, since Bill currently lived in Egypt, working for Gringott's as a cursebreaker. The other one would have to be Charlie the next oldest, who currently resided in Romania.

The Weasley twins were there, but Percy and Ron were missing. Perhaps one of them had been involved in some accident with a broom? No, Remus spotted them, each sacked out on a bed.

Remus returned Arthur's greeting with an acknowledging nod

The door to Poppy's office was half open. Remus knocked and poked his head around the door.

Poppy sat inside, drinking tea with a shaking hand, white as chalk, looking as though she had aged thirty years overnight.

"Poppy?" Remus asked, astounded, "What's happened?" he came in through the door, to sit down in the chair next to her.

In answer, Poppy put her elbows on her desk, her head in her hands and began to sob.
Remus quickly stood to shut the door, his alarm turning to something akin to terror. As Poppy's crying increased in volume, he cast a silencio for good measure and returned to the chair.

Poppy had not reacted this way the night the Longbottom boy had died. Nor when the healers had told them the little Hufflepuff girl had been interfered with sexually. Nothing that had happened even in the War had caused this sort of breakdown. Yes, of course, he had seen her weep, or more often rage, but she was always controlled, always able to carry on with the task at hand. A momentary weakness would be suppressed with an iron will. This shaking, keening creature, rocking herself as she cried, was just not the Poppy he knew.

At a loss, he gathered the older woman up in his arms, grateful that she was one of the few people who knew of his condition who didn't flinch from his touch.

It was a full five minutes before Poppy calmed down enough to speak, "I-I'm terribly sorry, Remus," she said hoarsely, "I...I am not...not myself at the moment."

"But what's happened?" Remus asked again, plaintively. He poured her another cup of tea, pressing it into her hand, "Can I get you something? A calming draught, perhaps?"

"Oh, no Remus," she held up her hand and shook her head, "I can't have that. It'll put me right to sleep again," she replied a little regretfully, he thought, "Just the tea," she blew on it, took a long sip. She closed her eyes, her mouth pulled down into a tense frown, "Last night, Ginny Weasley...she...well, it was a potions accident..." Poppy spoke slowly, as though it were hard for her to think of what she was saying, "She was attempting an illicit brew. She nearly died...Minerva, Severus and I used the Tribuo Vita"

"My god." gasped Remus, "Are you all right? Minerva? Is she...?" He felt his heart drop into his stomach. Wizards had been known to die from that spell. Poppy's uncharacteristic hysteria began to make sense.

Poppy nodded, "Yes, all fine. We were lucky we were all there. We had the triad to complete the spell, so that made it safe enough and then the sheer energy from Severus..." Poppy shook her head, "I would never want to duel him."

"How did you...?" Remus tried to wrap his head around what they had done, "So, Ginny Weasley...?"

"She'll recover." Poppy said, wearily, "But then, while we were tied up with that. Sirius Black broke into the castle. He made it into Gryffindor Tower."

Remus felt himself go still, "Was anyone hurt?" he asked softly, steeling himself for the answer.

Poppy shook her head. Remus was very glad he was sitting. His knees would have gone weak with relief.

"Poor Harry, though." Poppy went on, sadly, "He's having such a difficult time. He was down here, because he was one of the ones who'd raised the alarm over Ginny's accident. He's very close to the Weasleys, you know. Well, his familiar was up in the tower still, and it seems like he attacked Black. Chased him out of the tower and Black killed the poor thing. Blew him right up."

Remus was having a little trouble following Poppy's rambling narrative, "Black killed Harry's owl?" he asked, confused.

"Oh, no." Poppy shook her head, as if realizing she wasn't making much sense, "Sorry, you wouldn't know. Night before last, Harry brought him in. I forgot, you weren't feeling well,"
That was Poppy's code for Remus being too wolfsishly irritable to be around people. Some moons were worse than others. With all the recent stress, this had looked like it was going to be a bad one. Remus had retired early with his potion and a calming draught.

Poppy went on, "Harry had been out after curfew. Severus found him out on the grounds. Turns out he's been feeding this great black dog all term and he'd fallen asleep out on the grounds with him. The dog was very protective of Harry. Nearly took Severus arm off when he told Harry off. Well, you know how sharply Severus speaks, I suppose the dog thought he was going to hurt Harry. The dog knocked Severus right over and jumped on his wand hand, so he'd been a wizard's dog somewhere."

The hair on the back of Remus' neck stood on end, "A dog, you say?" he swallowed hard.

"Oh yes. Harry's been nicking food for it all year. I understand he's been sneaking off to see it every afternoon. Severus had mentioned that he'd seen the boy sliding in late for dinner a few times, you know. I must say, I was relieved when I found out it was something like that, and not something...well..." she trailed off, shaking her head.

Remus was very, very glad that Poppy was not herself. Otherwise, she would notice how her words were affecting him. He forced his shoulders to relax, took a couple deep breaths.

"So, Black killed the dog?" Remus asked slowly, trying to get her back to the point.

"Yes. The youngest Weasley boy's been keeping his dorm locked because one of the cats has been chasing his rat. Black broke in and was tearing the dorm apart looking for Harry and the dog just appeared in the middle of everything. Dumbledore thinks Black may have an invisibility cloak because the dog chased something out of the dorm, but the portraits didn't see anything. Of course, a dog would chase someone in an invisibility cloak by scent, wouldn't they?"

Remus nodded, "Who saw Black kill the dog?" he put his tea cup down and put his hands on his lap so Poppy wouldn't see them shake.

"No one. Not even a portrait. The dog chased Black down that blind corridor on the third floor and Black blew him up. Black must have doubled back and disappeared." sighed Poppy.

"Blew him up?" Remus blew out a long breath, "Anything left of him?"

"Just like poor Peter." sniffed Poppy, "Nothing left but a bloody collar."

"So, they haven't found Black?" Remus asked, controlling his voice, with effort.

"No, not hide nor hair. It's been sheer Bedlam all day. The Ministry's called back the Dementor's because of their affect on the children. The children are being sent home tomorrow, so the wards can be renewed." Poppy sipped her tea, "I can't say I'm sorry. I'm not going to be much good to anyone, for a while. The parents are being pretty adamant about the school closing and the wards being renewed. So, the board is granting everyone a paid leave." Poppy's mouth quirked up in a grim smile, "It's astonishing what a few well placed letters from Pure Blood parents can accomplish with Fudge. That man's such a..." she stopped, her cheeks going pink, "I should stop talking now." she said embarrassed.

Poppy looked at Remus, a little blearily, "Are you all right? Do you have anything that needs healing? Pomona can..."

Remus smiled, for the first time that morning, "I'm fine, Poppy. The potion...I can't tell you the difference it makes." Remus had never been able to afford the Wolfsbane potion before. It was only
The second time he'd been able to have it for the full week of the full moon, "I owe Severus a bottle of Firewhiskey, at the very least."

The galleons for the potion ingredients were coming out of the Hogwart's funds, but Severus was donating his time to make it. The man had stiffly refused both Remus' and Dumbledore's attempts to pay him for his time, remarking darkly that it was in his own best interests that Remus be rendered "mostly harmless".

"I'm afraid it's made me quite...quite tired, however. Do you think anyone will miss me today?" Remus lied. He wasn't ready to face Dumbledore until he decided how to deal with this latest.

Poppy shook her head, "I think it'll be fine. Half the teachers are leaving, as it is."

"Harry's all right, though? Dumbledore's sending Harry somewhere safe?" asked Remus, anxiously.

A peculiarly satisfied look came over Poppy's face, "Severus didn't care for the arrangements Dumbledore was making. Severus took him home with him."

Remus stared at her, "And Dumbledore let him? Is that wise?"

Poppy's eyes narrowed with displeasure, "Dumbledore has absolutely no say in the matter." she said coolly, "I spoke with Severus and I feel his plan is most sensible."

"But..." Remus sputtered, "Is he really the right person? I mean Severus..."

"Is well aware of his duty." Poppy said, "Which is more than I can say for some wizards." she finished bitterly.

Remus decided he didn't like to pursue this line of conversation with Poppy, at the moment. He might hear truths he would rather not know.

"If I'm not needed," said Remus, after a pause, "I think I have some business to take care of."

Poppy nodded vaguely, her eyes drooping again. Remus took her cup from her hand before it could spill and transfigured her chair into a settee.

"Oh no, Remus," she protested sleepily, "I really must..."

"Shh," said Remus, helping her put her feet up. "You can at least have a lie down, if you won't go to bed."

He, on the other hand, was going to look for that bloody dog.

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Severus was very relieved he had decided to travel by portkey rather than apparition. Not since the Dark Lord fell had Severus been so depleted. As it was, the encounter with Petunia had used up the last of his fading strength.

He reminded himself that, when he had the chance, he needed to look up the side effects of the Tribuo spell. It was rarely used, one had to be in just the right place at the right time.

The boy was in little better shape. His face was still that ashen color it had been when he'd collapsed in the parking lot. The Pepper-up potion Severus had given the child would be wearing off soon.

Mrs. Figg pushed them both to sit on her living room settee. She bustled about for a few minutes
fussing around until they were both in possession of cups of sugary tea. All the time keeping up a chatter that Severus could hardly follow and decided it was best to simply ignore.

"Professor..?" the boy asked slowly, as he drank his tea when Mrs. Figg had finally left the room to go look for Dumbledore's port key. It seemed like he was having a harder time than usual putting words into coherent speech.

"What, Potter?" Severus tried not to snap. One of Mrs. Figg's cats leaped up beside Severus, demanding attention. Absently, Severus stroked the cat, feeling his raw nerves ease a bit as the cat purred.

"My aunt and uncle? Are they really in danger?" the boy looked at Severus, almost pleadingly.

Severus nodded, he supposed he couldn't blame Potter for wanting a bit of petty revenge.

"Having me protected them...somehow..?" his voice was still slow, still with that pleading note Severus had never heard before.

"Yes, you'd have to ask the headmaster how that worked." Severus replied, thinking that the headmaster was going to owe the boy a great many explanations.

"I need to go back, then." the boy whispered. Potter sat with his head bowed of his tea cup, so Severus couldn't see his face properly.

"Go back..?" Severus was sure he must have missed something the boy said.

Potter took a deep breath, "To the Dursleys. You have to give me back." his hand shook as he held his tea cup. He shook his hair back as he looked up.

"Not half an hour ago you told me you were going to cut your own throat if I took you back, Potter." growled Snape, in no mood for games, "What the devil are you on about?"

"Someone's going to hurt them. And what about Dudley? What'll happen to him? It's fine. I can handle Uncle Vernon. It's..." Potter spoke rapidly, his voice high pitched.

"That's enough, Potter." said Severus, quietly. He was too tired to shout, no matter how infuriating the boy was being, "I have no interest in listening to this. As for your cousin, Granger's mother is making a report to the Muggle authorities about him. I have no doubt she'll be able to have him taken into care. Especially, if the Dursleys take my advice and leave tonight."

Potter goggled at him, "Why would they take Dudley away from the Dursleys?"

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose with his middle finger, wishing the boy would stop asking questions. However, these were the first actual questions Potter had asked about this whole thing, so Severus supposed they deserved an answer, "Because Madame Pomfrey and I are trying to arrange it for his protection. And because people who lock children in cupboards as punishment, should not be allowed to raise any children."

Potter stared at Severus for a moment, then looked away. Shrugged, "It wasn't like that." he said quietly, "Anyway, it wasn't punishment. They...you know...they had to make room for me."

"And, I suppose you didn't just have a panic attack that sent you into a state of nervous collapse?" sneered Severus, unable to help himself. He filed the boy's words away in his mind for later reflection.
"I just...it was a surprise and I guess I forgot to eat, today. Didn't feel well. I still don't." the boy admitted shakily, "I'm sorry I sort of lost it." Potter looked up at him with a strange mix of shame and defiance, "So, Dudley's going to...what? Get sent to an orphanage or something...? Because of me?"

"No...He's going to get placed into an alternative living situation because his parents are abusive bastards," grated Severus, "Who just happened to get on the wrong side of the entire Wizarding World. Would you prefer they continue to have the opportunity to raise a sociopath who would probably be jailed by the time he was twenty one?" Although, Severus privately thought it was too late to save Potter's cousin from that fate.

Severus was spared Potter's reply by the return of Mrs. Figg. She carried a great basket in both hands. It appeared heavy by the way she hefted it.

"Here you are dears. I packed you up a nice dinner. I thought it was silly of me to keep you sitting here all night when you're better off at home, poor things. I went with Albus earlier and made up the beds." Mrs. Figg put the basket down at Severus' feet.

Severus winced. He should have realized Albus would take it upon himself to "tidy up a bit".

The old woman pulled a wooden spoon from her pocket, "Here you are, Professor Snape." she said a bit too cheerfully, "I'll work you as soon as the both of you take hold of it."

Severus wearily stood, making sure his leg was in contact with the large basket, accepting the spoon from Mrs. Figg, "Come along, Potter," he said, gesturing for the boy to stand, "Have you ever taken a portkey?"

Potter stood up, shaking his head.

"Take a hold of it, and it will activate and take us to my..." Severus hesitated, "...our...home." The boy's gaze flickered upwards beneath the glasses.

Tentatively, the Potter reached for the spoon.

"Make sure you're in contact with your belongings." Severus cautioned.

Potter's hand paused, he looked at his backpack at his feet. Stepped on the strap. Severus nodded approvingly.

As Potter's hand closed on the handle, Severus felt the sensation of being pulled forward as though space as though he had been hooked somewhere behind his naval.

A whirl of color and light passed by them. Severus felt his feet connect solidly with the floor. Potter landed in a sprawl, by the sound of it. Severus couldn't see, the room was much too dark. He knew they were in the right place, though. He could smell the distinctive odor of his front room, composed of books, old wood, dusty furniture and disuse.

"Professor?" Potter's voice was a little panicky in the darkness.

"All right, Potter, don't panic. Let me get the light." Severus pulled out his wand and lit it. The boy was, indeed, sprawling on the floor near the fireplace. Severus took two steps and reached over to flick on the light.

Potter's expression was suspicious as he looked around the room, slowly climbing to his feet.

"Why...?" he began to ask, but he trailed off. He brushed his hand over the top of the end table next to Severus' favorite reading chair in an oddly fastidious gesture.
"Why, what?" asked Severus. Potter didn't continue and Severus felt much too tired to press him, "Come along." he told the boy brusquely, picking up the basket. He switched on the hallway light, thinking of his bed longingly, but aware that he needed to feed the boy and himself, as well as lay down some house rules or Potter would, undoubtedly, have the whole place down around his ears in two days time.

Severus wondered distantly if mild-to-moderate insanity could possibly be a side effect to donating a piece of one's soul to another. That could be the only reason for his actions of the last day.

He pushed away the memory of the image of Lily's accusing eyes as they stared at him from his dreams.

Potter followed him quietly into the kitchen. Severus flipped on the light, glanced at the child, trying to gauge his reaction.

The boy looked at the light switch as though it might bite him, then gazed around the tiny, old fashioned kitchen in some confusion.

Severus put the basket on the table and unpacked the various provisions Mrs. Figg had deemed fit to burden them with, while Potter seemed to get his bearings.

Severus pulled out the pint of milk and half a dozen eggs from the basket, "Put these in the fridge." he said quietly.

Severus wondered how Potter saw the place. Severus himself never spent much time in his kitchen, even when he was here, so he'd never bothered to change anything. The floor was a nondescript greying tile whose original color had long since faded from memory. Blue cupboards and drawers, the color his mother favored, with the stove and refrigerator in white. White porcelain sink and draining board.

The memory of his mother cooking the dinner on the stove with her wand came to mind. She never trusted the gas stove not to blow them all up, so she'd always used a Blue Flame charm. Most nights Severus' father never noticed the difference. Once or twice the old drunk had noticed, and his fear of her magic was as great as her fear of the gas stove.

Those nights were usually bad ones, around the Snape household.

"Er, there's things in here." Potter said suddenly, "Won't they have gone off?"

"It's not actually a fridge, anymore." replied Severus. He found the sandwiches that Mrs. Figg had made, grateful that he didn't have to dig around in his kitchen for an actual meal, "Stasis spell. The breadbox has one, as well." he nodded to the object on the counter, "And that cupboard." he pointed to the pantry cupboard, "I dislike waste." He summoned two plates from the cupboard and set the sandwiches on them.

"Really? That's brilliant!" Potter stared admiringly at the meager contents of the little fridge.

Severus snorted. Surrounded as he was every day by wonders, the child was impressed by a simple household spell?

"Come and eat." Severus said, irritably.

The child picked his way through half a sandwich, before seeming to give up. Severus sighed to himself, he'd have to start feeding the boy more potion.
That would wait, though. Severus worried that he and the boy would both pass out where they sat, if they stayed up any longer.

"I trust you can manage breakfast in the morning?" Severus thought to ask. It occurred to him that Petunia was so useless, she might never have taught Potter anything as helpful as cooking. The way Severus felt, there was no guarantee he’d be up much before noon, tomorrow.

Potter nodded, with a guarded expression.

"The appliances are all Muggle or they operate as if they are." Severus smiled to himself at Potter's look of surprise, "Don't burn the house down if you cook."

Potter nodded again.

"The bedrooms are upstairs. You'll have the guest room." Severus had never used it for anyone, but he'd furnished it years ago, and never bothered to change it.

"Yes, sir." Potter, said quietly, his face pale and pinched. It was long past time for them both to be in bed.

That uncomfortable sense of wanting to say something kind and reassuring came over him. He drew out the card with the Granger's home number written on the back, "Would you call the Grangers in the morning and let them know we arrived without incident?" Severus thought that feeling less cut off might be good for the boy.

Potter took the card with an air of open astonishment, "You have a telephone?" he stared at the card and then back at Severus.

"Right there." Severus pointed to the old fashioned black dial telephone where it hung on the wall, beside the fridge, "The telephone company has long since forgotten this house's existence, but the phone itself still works."

"Oh." Potter put the card down carefully in the middle of the table.

"Come along, then." Severus put the rest of the basket and the remains of the food into the pantry. Unexpectedly, Potter jumped up, put the remains of his sandwich in the fridge and washed the two plates they had used, carefully stacking them on the draining board.

So, at least the boy had been taught to wash dishes. That made some sense. Potter always finished detentions that involved scrubbing cauldrons very quickly and efficiently.

The stairs seemed as long as any at Hogwarts tonight. At the top of the stairs, Severus opened the guest room (now Potter's room, he supposed) door. They were greeted by two enormous yellow eyes.

"Hedwig!" cried Potter, going forward to greet his bird. Severus noted with approval that the rest of Potter's things had made it too. The window hung open slightly, the cold October wind chilling the room.

That wouldn't do. Severus cast a weather repelling charm on the window, "You can leave the window open for your bird to come and go." he said.

Potter seemed to have forgotten Severus was standing behind him, because he started a little, "Sir?"

"The owl can get through the window, but nothing else." Severus nodded to the open window.
"Oh. Thank you." Potter smiled, tiredly.

Potter definitely should not look that grateful for the simple courtesy a wizard accorded another wizard's familiar, Severus decided.

The owl appeared to have only been waiting for them to greet her, before she went hunting for the evening. She nipped Potter's finger and gave Severus a little head bob, before she took off, out of the window again.

Severus glanced around. The bed was indeed freshly made and turned down.

Severus wondered how the modest bedroom compared to whatever the boy had at Petunia's. Severus had only seen the Dursley's front room, after all. It was Lupin who had gotten the grand tour and they had not spoken of it at all, beyond Lupin confirming the tale of locked doors and barred windows.

There was an awkward pause.

"Well, good night Potter." Severus was so tired his eyes were blurring.

"Good night, sir."
Light shining in Harry's face woke him the next morning. He struggled awake, felt around for his glasses. Putting them on, the first thing he saw was the reassuring shape of a snowy owl, fluffed up and motionless, by the window.

"Hey, girl?" Harry said, softly. He didn't want to wake her if she was really asleep, but he did like to know she was all right.

Hedwig opened one eye, gave a contented little chirrup, then sleepily closed it again, settling in for a sleep on the perch that had been left for her.

By the look of the light, it was at least nine o'clock. Snape wasn't banging on his door, so Harry supposed sleeping so late must be all right, for now. The house was very, very quiet. It didn't seem as though Snape was up yet. The Professor had looked pretty rough by the time they'd gotten here last night, so Harry supposed that made sense.

The bedroom Snape had given him was smaller than the one he'd occupied on Privet Drive, but it was reassuringly devoid of locks. In fact, it appeared that the only lock on the door bolted from the inside.

It was decorated in a muted beige. The bedclothes, carpet and curtains all looking as though they'd been spelled to be as inoffensive a color as possible. If it was a guestroom, Harry supposed that made sense. Harry's trunk was pushed up against the wall, next to Hedwig's perch. Hedwig's cage was also pushed up against the wall, as if no one expected it to be used. Under the perch was a tray of newspaper, similar to what generally went into the bottom of Hedwig's cage. It was a setup much closer to what Hedwig was accustomed to at Hogwarts or the Weasley's.

When he thought about it, Harry felt stupid for being surprised. Of course, Snape would be accustomed to owls.

Harry lay in bed for another minute or two, trying to figure out what he should do. Snape had asked Harry if he could manage breakfast. Did he mean for both of them? Or just for Snape?

No, it must be for both of them. The way Snape chased him around about eating, Harry was fairly certain Snape meant for him to get his own breakfast, as well.

Harry slid out of bed, he hadn't bothered to undress properly last night. He'd just taken off his jeans. He peeked into the hallway. Snape's bedroom door was firmly shut.

Harry decided to chance a quick shower. Hopefully this wouldn't be the sort of house whose loud plumbing would wake the Professor.

Ron had always been surprised by Harry's ability to get in and out of the bathroom inside of five minutes, if he had to. Ron said that his brothers could take hours, never mind who else would be waiting.
When Harry was done, the house was still silent. It was a bit creepy, actually. Not liking to make more noise than necessary, he crept down the stairs in his stocking feet.

The old fashioned clock in the kitchen said half-past nine. Harry dug around in the fridge and cupboards to see what was there.

Just milk and eggs were in the fridge. No sausage or anything. Harry reckoned he would make omelets then; he was good at those. Petunia had been given a whole cookbook full of omelet and omelet-like things. She'd made two or three recipes out of it, before she decided it was too much trouble. She'd given the book to Harry after that.

Further digging found some cheese to go into the omelets. They had a half dozen eggs, so Harry used all of them. Sifting through the cupboards, Harry found an actual omelet pan. He fancied he would have liked some mushrooms or something to liven them up a bit. He shook his head at himself ruefully, it wasn't as if he was going to be able to impress Snape, of all people.

By ten o'clock, breakfast was ready, but still no Snape. He wondered what to do with the food so that it would say hot. If he put it in the oven, it would be dried out and disgusting in about ten minutes. He couldn't just put a warming charm on it, since as far as he knew, he still wasn't allowed to do magic away from school. There was no way that Harry was going to try to wake Snape.

Snape had said the breadbox had a stasis charm on it. That would work. In fact, that was better than a warming charm, which had a tendency to render the food inedible if left too long, not unlike heating it in an oven. Harry took out the half loaf of bread, putting that in the pantry, and stuck the plate in there with the hot tea pot.

Harry ate his own breakfast, the quiet beginning to really get on his nerves. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. Would Snape want him to keep to his room, or would he want Harry to be doing something else?

He washed his breakfast dishes, taking comfort in the prosaic task. Snape's kitchen was really a pleasant little room, if one ignored the grime that seemed to cover everything. The cornflower blue cupboards and white sink gave it a homeliness that Petunia's pristine, antiseptic kitchen always seemed to lack. The fridge was only a half sized and had to be older than Snape. The stove was the same. The kitchen table was wooden, painted the same color as the cupboards, with no tablecloth. It had seen better days, but Harry was sure it would be very nice if it were cleaned.

Idly, Harry started to wipe down the counters when he was done with the dishes. The trouble with cleaning one part of the kitchen, Harry decided, was that it made the rest of the room look shabbier.

He searched around, not finding a mop or broom. He finally found a pile of rags buried in the back of the sink cabinet, behind a bottle of some variety of all purpose cleaner. There wasn't much there. Harry supposed, if Snape ever bothered to clean, he must use magic.

The window over the sink was dingy, and looked out onto an overgrown back garden that was surrounded by a low wall. Frowsy white curtains, that had also seen better days, hung on either side of the window, half obscuring the view.

Without giving it any real thought, Harry filled the sink full of water and poured the cleaner in, taking some time to give the counter, cabinets and table a proper wash. Not having a broom was irritating. He would have liked to sweep. He washed the little kitchen window and wondered if Snape had a washing machine. If so, he could wash the curtains.

By the time he finished cleaning the kitchen almost to his satisfaction (he still hadn't swept or
mopped and the stove interior needed cleaning), it was getting on for noon. Harry wondered if he should check to see if Snape was even alive.

Halting footsteps, coming from upstairs signaled that the Professor was probably still with the living.

Harry whisked the rags back under the sink, not liking to give Snape a reason to complain that he'd left the job half done by leaving his cleaning things out.

The bathroom door opened and shut. After a moment, Harry heard the sound of the shower running.

Uncertainly, Harry hovered in the kitchen for a moment. Making up his mind, he took the Professor's breakfast out of the breadbox and put it on the tea tray he'd found while cleaning. He filled the small milk jug and included the sugar bowl, since he couldn't remember if he'd seen Snape take sugar. Whenever Uncle Vernon or Dudley was sick, Aunt Petunia had insisted that they be served their meals in their rooms.

Carefully, Harry took the meal up to Snape's room. The door hung half open, so all Harry had to do was slip in with the tray.

The room was disappointing in that it appeared so normal. No bats, or skulls or peculiar things floating in jars. Floor to ceiling bookshelves covered two walls. The bed faced towards the window which had a low table under it. Harry put the meal there.

The curtains were a dark burgundy and kept the light out admirably. Harry opened those to let in the thin sunlight. The window had a view of the street outside. Going by the buildings opposite him, Harry could see they were on a street of bleak little row houses.

The walls not covered with bookshelves were white with dark green trim. The mussed bed had simple white sheets with a comforter that carried the burgundy and dark green coloring. The carpet was dark green and needed a vacuum.

Snape's bedclothes were tossed around as if the man had slept badly the night before. Without thinking about it, Harry shook the sheets out and made the bed, making sure it was made to Petunia's exacting standards.

Harry hoped that Snape wasn't going to drown, given the amount of time he was spending in the shower. Not wanting to intrude on the man's privacy, he retreated downstairs when he heard the water stop running.

The kitchen felt quite cozy, now that it was clean, with the early afternoon sun shining through the window.

Harry took a moment to look around the kitchen again, pleased with the morning's work. He'd have to find a broom and a mop soon. Perhaps some bleach would be able to clean off the floor tile.

He retrieved one of the rags from under the kitchen sink. There was no furniture polish under there either. Perhaps Snape kept his cleaning things somewhere else?

The living room was badly in need of dusting and Harry's nerves were too jangled to let him keep still. It seemed absolutely surreal that he was here, in Snape's home. He remembered then, the way Snape had called it "our home".

The footsteps overhead walked from the bathroom to Snape's bedroom.

Harry dusted the whole front room before he heard any footsteps again.
A lot of Harry's childhood had been spent listening to footsteps. Judging the mood of the adults in the house from the volume and cadence of the steps. Quick, light steps were safe enough, slow, deliberate steps needed caution and heavy thumps meant to get out of Uncle Vernon's way.

Snape was still rather unsteady, if the pauses on the stairway meant anything. Harry realized that the stone floors at Hogwarts had accustomed him to his teacher's boots clicking rather than thumping. Snape's footfalls were always purposeful. That is when you could actually hear them. Plenty of times the man would just seem to appear right behind you.

Harry listened to Snape lurch down the stairs to the kitchen. Dishes rattled into the sink. Water ran, so perhaps Snape was doing his own dishes? Harry wondered if he'd be in trouble for that. On the other hand, if he dashed in to take the task over, Snape might get annoyed. It was a no win situation, as usual.

"Potter? Where've you gotten to?" snapped the Professor from the kitchen.

Harry stowed his dust rag in his pocket, "I'm here," he said, hurrying into the other room. He stood in the doorway, not sure if he should sit down with the Professor or not.

Snape was sitting at the kitchen table, his chair back to the wall, glaring around the room. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a grey sweater, his hair still damp from his shower. It was a little startling to see him out of his usual black. Even stranger to see him wearing something other than wizard robes.

"Did you eat this morning?" The Professor asked, his arms folded across his chest, his long legs stretched out.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes, he didn't want to irritate Snape, for all that Snape had assured Harry that he wouldn't raise a hand to him. Harry reckoned it was just a matter of time before Snape forgot that, "Yes, sir." he said quietly.

Snape glared at him some more, "What have you been doing all morning?" demanded the man.

Snape must be irked that the rest of the house hadn't been seen to. Certainly the kitchen floor should have been swept and scrubbed, Harry knew.

"Slept late." Harry admitted, a little shamefaced, waiting for one of the man's scathing lectures.

Something about the man's glare softened around the edges. That must have been an acceptable answer, "Yes, well, given the events of the past two days, I can't say I'm surprised."

Harry just nodded; it seemed the safest thing to do.

"I'm afraid I'm not quite myself yet, Potter." continued Snape, tiredly, "I hope it's not too much to ask if you can keep yourself occupied and out of trouble for a few days? The school wards are going to take several weeks to renew."

The tone lacked Snape's usual bite. Harry thought he must not be feeling like himself at all.

Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a wristwatch, "If you leave the house..."

"I can leave the house?" interrupted Harry, without thinking. He assumed he'd be stuck here.

Snape fixed him with his familiar cold stare.
"Sorry." Harry muttered.

Snape threw the wristwatch onto the table, "Put that on." he said

Harry picked the thing up and stared at it. It looked like a plain digital watch, except instead of numerals, the face read: Safe.

"It's keyed to my household wards." Snape explained, "I'm the only wizard hereabouts. If another wizard passes my wards, the alarm will go off and it will become a portkey and bring you back here. If you leave the wards, it will do the same. My wards extend to about a five minute walk in every direction."

Harry picked up the watch and put it on slowly, feeling a little like he was putting on some kind of tether.

"Don't imagine you can leave the house without it." Snape sneered, "The door won't open to you, if you don't have it on."

So much for no locks on the doors, thought Harry. He kept his mouth shut, since there wasn't a thing he could say that wouldn't get him in trouble.

"If you need anything," Snape went on, "I keep some Muggle money in the drawer over there." He pointed with his chin to the bottom drawer, "If you want to order take away, there's a rather good Indian up the street." he finished, almost contemplatively.

Harry had never had Indian, but he wasn't going to tell Snape that.

Snape closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. Harry tensed, worried that the man was going to topple over, or something.

"Can I get you something Professor?" Harry asked, anxiously.

Snape just shook his head, still with his eyes closed. He looked like Vernon, after he'd been out too late the night before.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry put the kettle on.

Snape must have fallen asleep again. His breathing was slow and even; he didn't even move the whole time Harry was making the tea. When it was finished, Harry poured Snape a cup, setting it down in front of the man with a faint click.

No response. Harry watched the man breathing, just to make sure he was still doing it, before Harry went back to his dusting. As long as Harry was in motion, he didn't have to think about anything.

When the whole of the downstairs was reasonable (not really clean yet, but at least Harry wouldn't be embarrassed if someone came to the door), Harry went back into the kitchen. Snape was still dozing. With his head back like that, Harry was sure the Professor was going to wake up with a terrible kink in his neck, and wouldn't that help the man's mood?

Taking a deep breath, Harry tiptoed up next to the man. He called softly, "Professor?" At the same time, Harry reached out to shake the man's shoulder.

As soon as Harry touched him, Snape started, pulled his wand from somewhere (he drew it so quickly that Harry wasn't sure from where, exactly), and aimed it straight at Harry.
Harry heard no incantation, but he was suddenly completely unable to move.

Snape stared at him, for what felt like an age, his expression murderous.

Harry felt his heart pounding in his chest and noticed the spell didn't stop him from trembling with fear. He also discovered, to his utter horror, that tears had started down his cheeks, that he could neither hide, nor blink away.

Snape blinked a few times, staring at Harry as if he'd never seen him before. The man seemed to say something to himself that Harry didn't catch and he gave his wand a little wave, canceling the spell, "Potter." he said, his voice flat. He swallowed, "You startled me."

Harry found he could move again. He turned away from the man, his throat tight, "What was that for?" he demanded, rubbing his face to get rid of the tears.

"I took you for someone else." replied Snape, quietly, "I did not mean to frighten you. I am...overtired, I think."

That was probably as close to an apology as Harry was ever likely to get, "You didn't." he returned harshly, getting a grip on himself.

Harry's heart slowly stopped racing. It had just been an immobilizing spell, after all. They were completely harmless. Come to think of it, Harry didn't like people shaking him awake. He supposed was very likely lucky that Snape hadn't cast something either lethal or painful at him

He and his classmates had been had been using various immobilizing spells on each other since last year. Hermione had cast one at Neville in their first year.

Thinking of Neville made Harry's heart contract in his chest. He shook his head to clear it.

The silence was awkward. Harry turned around to see Snape casting a warming spell on his cup and adding sugar.

"Would you like some tea, Potter?" asked Snape, sounding as though he were attempting to bridge the awkwardness. Harry thought the offer of tea was more awkward than Snape hexing him.

"No. Thank you," Harry hesitated, "Er...There were a few things I wanted to buy. " They were out of eggs and almost out of milk, and Harry had no idea what he was going to make for dinner. "Is there a shop anywhere?"

Snape nodded, "Just up the street, there's a few shops."

Harry went to the drawer where Snape had said he kept Muggle money. A collection of notes and coins sat in what was otherwise a junk drawer. Harry was not expecting there to be quite this much-he took out what he thought was enough so he could do the food shopping.

Harry heard a small sigh from behind him, when he turned he saw that Snape had fallen asleep with his head on the table.

"Professor?" called Harry, not touching the man, this time.

"What?" Snape asked groggily, his hand tightening on his wand that he had not put away. He lifted his head to look at Harry.

"You...er...fell asleep again." Harry said with concern, "Is that normal? After that spell you used?"
Snape nodded, his eyes bleary, "I suppose so."

"Listen, why don't you go back to bed?" Harry heard himself using the voice Petunia used to cajole Dudley and Vernon.

Snape peered around the kitchen, for a moment, "I suppose..."

"Come on then, sir." Harry said a little impatiently. He couldn't very well carry Snape to bed. The man was a menace like this.

The older wizard shook his head and rubbed his eyes, finally staggering to his feet. Harry was at his elbow right away, 'Get off, Potter," muttered Snape, but without any real anger, "I can manage."

Harry stepped back, "So, it's all right if I pop out for a few minutes?" he asked, as the man headed up the stairs. He felt he needed to make absolutely sure.

Snape paused, nodded without looking back, "Take your wand, but unless you are in fear for your safety, do not use it."

"I thought this thing was supposed to bring me back here if the wards are broken?" Harry indicated the watch he was wearing, "You said..."

"People other than wizards can be dangerous." Snape replied darkly, "It will bring you back if you're beaten unconscious by the local hooligans, as well. I presume you'd rather avoid that?"

"Oh." Harry wished he had Snuffles to take with him, then he winced inwardly. The dog was yet another thing he didn't want to think about.

Harry went to find his trainers and his coat. His heart lifted a little at the prospect of an outing, even one so mundane as food shopping.

Opening the front door, he found himself assaulted by sound. After the quiet of the house, he was surprised by the sheer noisiness of the street. Harry realized Snape must have a permanent silencing charm on the house. Not even the fridge had made a sound.

But, out here, the distant sound of car engines and smell of petrol fumes told him that they were very near a motorway.

The street itself was rather rundown, just as the view from the upstairs window promised. Harry looked both ways on the street, spotting a little row of shops that seemed to be the ones Snape had indicated.

So intent was Harry to get his errands done, that he never noticed the elderly woman in a pink coat, eyeing him as she locked her own door, until she spoke, "Hello there, dear." she said, "Have you just moved in? I didn't know they'd put the house up on the market."

Harry started. He must be as jumpy as Snape.

"Er, no, I haven't...that is...I'm only here for a few weeks. I'm staying with Professor Snape." sputtered Harry. He had no idea what the old woman might know of Snape, so he had no idea what he was supposed to say.

The old woman stared at him, then her eyes lit with comprehension, "So it's 'Professor' Snape, is it? That's why he's only here in the summer? I always did wonder. He always keeps to himself, so I never get the chance to ask. Of course, his father was the same. Quiet, you know."
Harry nodded, desperately hoping he wasn't going to be in trouble with Snape for talking to the old woman. Petunia hated for Harry to talk to the neighbors.

The old lady went on, "But, why are you both here, now?"

"Er, the school needs some repairs. There was a bit of an accident you see." Harry replied, making up a story on the spot, "Plumbing."

"Oh, I see." she said, sounding as if she didn't.

"Well, it's a boarding school, you understand, and my family..." Harry didn't quite know where to go next.

*My family doesn't want me back. There's no one who wants me. Snape's stuck with me.*

The old woman was looking at him expectantly, as he trailed off.

"Professor Snape had to bring me with him, until school's repaired." Harry finished lamely, shrugging.

"Is this the same school Professor Snape went to?" She asked, quite kindly.

"Er, I think so?" Harry told her. He didn't mean for it to come out as a question.

"Oh." she said, "You must be terribly clever, then." The woman smiled, "I knew Professor Snape's parents. He went to a school for the gifted and talented, his mother told me."

Harry smiled, breathing a sigh of relief, "Yes, ma'am."

That made the old woman laugh, "Oh my dear, don't 'ma'am' me. I'm not the Queen, you know. I'm Mrs. Cook. Now, do you know where you're going?"
Severus stood outside of the Gryffindor common room, uncomfortably aware of the stares he was receiving from the Gryffindors who passed by. Finally, one of the girls in Lily's year seemed to take pity on him. She actually listened to him as he made his plea and promised to take his message to Lily.

A moment later, Lily stood in front of him.

"Lily, I'm sorry." he said plaintively, "I didn't mean it."

*Her eyes were blazing, "You drew a wand on my son!" she growled, "How dare you?"

Was that what happened? He didn't remember what he'd done; all he knew was that he'd buggered something up.

"I'm sorry." Memory started to fill in. The boy staring at him, unable to move, tears trickling down his frightened face, "He startled me. I didn't mean to. It just...happened."

He took a step towards her. They were in the kitchen of his home on Spinner's End, not at Hogwarts at all.

*Lily had her arms folded across her chest, "Don't do it again." she hissed.

"No, of course not." Severus agreed quickly, "I'm sorry."

"It's not me you need to apologize to." she said harshly, "And you're not the only one."

"Only one what?"

"Who needs to apologize to Harry." another voice said, quietly.

Severus turned to see James Potter standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Severus stiffened, crossing his arms over his chest, "What are you doing here?" he hissed.

James slouched in, while Lily glared at both the men. Her fierce attitude warning them both to behave.

"Come in and sit down." snapped Lily, to James.

Severus opened his mouth to protest, but the look Lily turned on him made him shut it again.

James sat at the kitchen table, "I expect all the adults in Harry's life owe him an apology." Lily's husband sat with his elbows on the table in front of him, his hands resting palms down with the fingers curved. Severus stared at the man's hands, realizing that the younger Potter's hands were very different. James' hands were broad and short fingered, capable and strong. Harry's fingers
were long and fine boned, almost delicate. The hands of an artist or a musician.

Or a potion's master, Severus realized with a start, looking at his own hands. How could he have missed that?

James looked up to catch Severus' eye, "I'm sorry."

Taken aback, Severus asked, in the iciest voice he could muster, "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sorry that we never had a chance to talk this over. Sorry that I never had the chance to thank you." James ran a hand through his hair, "I wanted to."

"Thank me?" Severus shook his head, confused.

Severus woke with a gasp and a start. This was getting unnerving. He'd been dreaming of Lily since this whole thing started, but now to be dreaming of James Potter...

Severus sat up, feeling stiff. The room's darkness was so complete that it looked the same whether his eyes were open or shut. He reached over and turned on the lamp, wincing a bit when the light dazzled his eyes.

The clock read half-past three, so he'd slept about fourteen hours (assuming he hadn't slept through to the next day). He was thirsty, needed to use the toilet and felt like he could do with another shower.

He glanced at the pocket watch that lay on the bedside table. The watch only had one hand, marked "HJP". Rather than numbers, it had words. Right now, it pointed to the word where the number nine would normally be: "Sleeping".

That was reassuring. Of course, the alarm would go off if the hand pointed to "Mischief" or "Mortal peril", keyed as it was to Potter's magical signature and Severus' own household wards.

Molly Weasley had spelled the watch for him. Grudgingly, Severus had to admit that Mrs. Weasley was actually a rather formidable witch. He had never thought of it before, but she was, in her own way, as powerful as any of the Hogwart's heads of house. Her speciality was protective spells—with seven children, Severus supposed it would have to be.

Her own family clock was quite efficacious apparently. The Weasley family clock's alarm had started ringing as soon as the hand of the clock that represented the girl had reached "Mortal Peril". According to Dumbledore, Molly (she had insisted that Severus call her by her given name) had been frantically trying to contact both Minerva and Dumbledore, at the same moment she received the headmaster's message about her daughter.

When Severus had asked her to put an alarm on the watch for "Mischief", Molly had laughed at him. Severus couldn't find it in him to be offended—her laughter was more nerves and exhaustion than amusement, "If my clock went off every time one of my children were up to mischief," she'd said, "I'd never get any sleep."

She'd added the alarm for him, though.

Every time Severus had woken, he'd checked the watch. In the afternoon it had pointed to "Shops", then "Home". Surprisingly, at no point did it even get close to "Mischief".

Slowly, with many pauses, Severus made it to the bathroom and back. This time, the bed wasn't made, so Severus assumed that the elf Albus had sent them must also be sleeping.
That was all to the good. Severus was going to have words with Dumbledore about that; he knew how Severus felt about the creatures. It was fine for them to be the Hogwarts' staff; any school would need staff, but Severus drew the line at them following him home. When he'd first started teaching, an elf had followed Severus home. The elf assigned to look after Severus' rooms at Hogwarts. Apparently, each teacher had an elf assigned to them and most of the teachers would "borrow" the elf for the summer holidays.

It had taken a few days that time, but Severus had eventually caught the elf in the kitchen and given it a direct order to go back to Hogwarts and stay there. The poor thing had been quite put out until Severus had given it a job—he'd told it that he'd rather have it keeping the castle with the other elves.

It wasn't the elves themselves that bothered him; Severus was deeply uncomfortable with the idea of keeping slaves. He supposed it was his Muggle heritage showing through, but all the arguments for keeping house elves were the exact same ones that had been espoused for keeping human slaves at one time. He kept his thoughts on that to himself, of course. Such attitudes did not endear one to Pure Blood society, but as Severus had grown older, Pure Blood society mattered less and less.

When Severus had tottered back from the bathroom, he saw that the elf had done some minor rearranging, at some point during the day. The breadbox from the kitchen sat on the table by the window. Severus opened it slowly, wondering what on earth it was doing there.

Inside the breadbox, kept at the proper temperature by the stasis charm, was a plate of shepherd's pie, a few slices of bread, the small tea pot, and a little jug of milk. A tea cup and the sugar bowl sat beside the breadbox.

Severus shook his head, deciding that he was going to have some serious words with Dumbledore. This was a little more initiative than house elves generally took, but it was a clever way to avoid direct contact with Severus. That way there was no chance that he could order the elf away—and if he didn't know it's name, he couldn't very well call it to himself in order to do that.

Biting back his irritation, Severus sat down to eat. The shepherd's pie was a different recipe than what the elves generally made at the castle. Still quite palatable, but heavier on some of the spices and lighter on the salt. Likely, this was a recipe the headmaster favored.

As he had in the afternoon, Severus took his dishes down to the kitchen himself. It would take more than doing his own dishes to convince the house elf to leave, Severus knew, but it was the principle of the thing.

He wasn't tired enough to go back to bed, yet. He put the kettle on and went into the front room to look for something to read. He still wanted to look up the side effects of the Tribuo spell. He had at least two books that made reference to it.

To his surprise, Potter was asleep on the settee, a low fire in the fireplace. One of the electric lamps had been left on. A book that Severus recognized from his own shelves was laying across the boy's chest. Apparently Potter had fallen asleep reading.

Severus sat down on the chair near the fire, his dream coming back to him as he stared at Potter's hands. He had been correct, the boy's hands were very like his own.

He remembered a conversation he'd had with Lily, the last time he'd seen her. The only time Severus had seen the child before Lily's death.

At the time, he'd been much more concerned with Lily's plans for keeping herself safe, than with the baby. It was just before they went into hiding, so that would have made the boy, perhaps, eleven
months old. Lily and her son were staying at Hogwarts until their safe house could be arranged. The elder Potter and Dumbledore had been visiting a proposed site that day and Severus had come to make a report to Dumbledore.

He'd seen her in the corridor, taking the child out for a bit of sun. Severus insisted on walking with her. Hogwarts was secure, but Severus still felt apprehensive letting Lily walk alone.

They'd sat by the lake, talking seriously about the War while the baby pulled up bits of grass and threw them into the air. He'd not taken much notice of the black haired bundle that Lily held so precious, to be honest. Until the bits of grass the baby threw up into the air stayed in the air. The child laughed with astonishment and reached for the grass, while Lily laughed with joy. It had been the child's first magic. A moment that was celebrated in wizarding families like a child's first steps or first words.

"James will be sorry he missed this." she'd said.

In a rare moment of playfulness, Severus had summoned a few daisies and sent them to dance with the blades of grass, much to Lily and her son's delight.

Only one other time had Severus laid eyes on the boy, before he'd come to Hogwarts, but that didn't bear thinking about.

When the boy had arrived at Hogwarts, Severus had been quite happy to hate him on sight. The child's existence was a knife to his gut. A living reminder of Severus' guilt. He wished every day that he'd refused Lily.

Severus couldn't help but think that he was damned thrice over. If he'd never agreed to Lily's scheme, she might not have been with child, and the Dark Lord would never have targeted her. It would have been better if she had gone to a Muggle sperm bank. Odds were, it would have taken a year or more for her to conceive. Perhaps they would have given up entirely, chosen some war orphan to adopt. Then again, if she had mothered a squib, their little family might be safe and whole now.

Of course, if things had gone differently, the Dark Lord would possibly still be in power. The Dark Lord's supporter's had been many. With the full weight of the Pure Blood wizards behind him, the Dark Lord seemed poised to gain complete control over Wizarding Britain.

If the Dark Lord's ambitions had been realized, as a Muggle-born, Lily's life wouldn't have been worth half a knut. One of the reasons Severus had taken what he'd overheard that night in the Hogshead to the Dark Lord. He just thought it was a piece of information that no one else had. His former master had valued such things as proof of loyalty.

Severus had been trying desperately to curry favor with the Dark Lord; he had hoped, among other things, to use the influence to protect Lily. Severus had never thought the Dark Lord would put so much stock in the ravings of an alleged seer. And he certainly never imagined he'd put it together with the Potters.

When he realized his mistake, Severus had told the Dark Lord that he desired Lily - a motivation the Dark Lord could understand. Love, whether friendship, familial or romantic, was beyond the Dark Lord. Severus sincerely doubted the man (was he a man any more?) had ever had a lover, male or female. However, the Dark Lord understood lust, avarice and the need for power over another. He viewed Severus' request in that light, and it had been easy to convince the Dark Lord that Severus wanted Lily not only to warm his bed, but as a kind of revenge against an old foe.
The Dark Lord had given Severus a promise: he would spare the woman's life. She need only to give up the child and she could live.

That was when Severus went to Dumbledore. He knew in his soul that his friend, his Lily, a true healer in her heart of hearts, would never step aside to let anyone be harmed, let alone her precious child.

James Potter had sent a message to Severus, through Dumbledore, days before he died. A note that had asked Severus to do whatever he had to do to protect Lily and Harry, if something were to happen to him. He'd laid it on Severus' shoulder's keep his family safe.

Severus had failed miserably on every count, it seemed.

Drops of water fell onto Severus' hands, startling him. For a few seconds, he stared in confusion at the moisture, before he realized he was weeping.

He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand, getting himself under control. It wasn't like him to have his emotions so close to the surface.

The sleeping boy turned his head. Severus could see his profile in the light of the electric lamp. It wasn't James Potter's profile that he saw then. The child's face, in the dim light, was all Evans. The boy's nose was like Mr. Evans' and the mouth coming from Lily's mother's side. It did have those pieces that stuck up making it impossible for the hair to lie down flat, just like James, but the color could have come from anywhere.

Perhaps Lily hadn't used James' whole hairbrush, after all.

The child turned over again, then sat up suddenly. He stared at Severus with wide eyes.

Severus wasn't even sure the boy was actually awake, "Potter?" he rasped, "What are you doing in here?"

The boy shook his head. "Professor?" he asked, anxiously, squinting at Severus.

"Yes, Potter." Severus replied, evenly.

The boy seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, fumbled around for his glasses, "Couldn't sleep." he muttered, locating them and putting them on. The Evans resemblance was subdued now. The boy looked more like Lily's husband, with the scruffy hair and glasses being his most prominent features.

"It appears you have managed to fall asleep in here, however." Severus returned.

The boy shrugged, "I started a fire. Thought it might help me sleep." he gathered up the blanket from the settee and wrapped it around himself, "I'll get out of your way, sir." he said, moving to stand.

"Never mind, Potter." sighed Severus, "I was only coming to get a book. But now you're awake, I suppose you'd like some tea?" Severus didn't know what possessed him to offer the boy tea. He just had a vague might have some more success drawing the boy out of himself. He'd found with the students in his house that there were things that could only be spoken of in the dead of night.

It was almost comical, the look of puzzlement that came over the boy's face.

"Stay there." Severus said, rising to get the tea.

When he returned, Potter had poked up the fire and was staring at it. Severus put the tea tray down
on the coffee table, poured two cups, handing the first to the child.

Severus wasn't sure how to start this conversation. Most of the time, when he had this sort of encounter with one of the students in his house, they were falling over themselves to unburden their souls. He seldom had to do more than provide a willing pair of ears.

Unfortunately, there was so much bad blood between himself and the child, that he knew it was not going to be so easy. This was more than a case of homesickness, that would mend itself in a day or two. And it was not as if Severus could pawn Potter off on Poppy, as he usually did with those students who seemed in need of more than a cup of tea. No, at the moment Potter was entirely his problem.

"Did you call Granger?" Severus asked. It seemed as good an opening as any.

Potter started, as though he'd forgotten Severus was there, "No. I suppose I forgot." he replied softly.

"Call her in the morning, or she'll be be thinking I chopped you into potion ingredients." grated Severus, and then, plowing ahead because he had to start somewhere, "You seem rather angry at Miss Granger. Any reason why?"

Potter just stared at him for a minute. The boy's eyes narrowed, "I'm not angry at her." he said, gruffly.

"So, you always call her names?" Severus settled back in his chair with his tea cup, "That seems...uncharacteristic."

"What do you mean 'call her names'?" the boy asked indignantly.

"During your...episode." Snape sipped his tea, "Although you did seem quite beside yourself. Perhaps you don't recall?"

"I..." Potter began, then he trailed off and shrugged.

"In fact, I've noticed that there has been quite some distance between you and the rest of your housemates. You have become quite withdrawn." Severus was too tired to be anything but blunt.

The boy shrugged again.

"Perhaps, she's done something to upset you?" Severus pressed.

Potter shook his head, remaining silent. Severus was trying to think of something else to say when Potter muttered, "She should just mind her own business." into his tea.

"She is rather overly-inquisitive." Severus watched the boy carefully. Potter had started to swing his feet back and forth, his mouth pulled down sharply, "What did you not want her inquiring about?"

he asked, carefully.

"Nothing." The the boy's mouth twisted, as though overcome with some emotion. Severus didn't catch what it was. And then, he snarled, "She just shouldn't talk behind my back. That's not what friends do."

"Ah." Severus sipped his tea some more, "So, you're displeased that she and the Weasleys went to Lupin with their suspicions?"

"What? Percy went with them?" Potter asked, surprised.
"No. The twins. Apparently those two reprobates have enough sense to talk to an adult when they feel something is badly wrong." So, the Weasley twins hadn't revealed their part in this to Potter. Severus thought that was very interesting, "In fact, they were the most adamant that your guardians were less than adequate. Miss Granger seemed to lose her nerve a bit, when she found out I was going to be part of the conversation."

"George and Fred talked to you?" Potter asked, blankly.

"That surprises you?" Belatedly, Severus remembered he had promised them anonymity. He went on softly, "They were concerned for you."

"What did they tell you?" Potter's voice was low, angry. He held his teacup tightly in two hands.

"They said that they rescued you from your relatives with their father's car. That at the time your Aunt and Uncle had been starving you and keeping you under lock and key." Severus looked into Potter's angry eyes, "I don't understand why it concerns you so. This would have come out when you were examined regardless. Your relatives mistreatment of you is written all over your body."

Abruptly, Potter's shoulders dropped, "I'm being stupid. I just wish..." he trailed off, looking down, "You and Lupin. You both went to the Dursley's?"

Severus wasn't sure where the boy had gotten that bit of information, but he saw no reason to deny it, "Yes."

"Did Aunt Petunia show you my cupboard?" the child asked harshly.

"Actually, no." replied Severus, calmly, "You keep mentioning it, though. Why is that?"

Potter scowled and shot Severus a venomous look. He shut his mouth firmly and turned his gaze back to the fire.

"Do you often sleep on a settee rather than your bed?" Severus asked, after a few moments.

Potter nodded, a little sheepishly, "I've always had trouble sleeping. Sometimes I just read in bed, but sometimes I feel too...I don't know...claustrophobic? So I go down to the common room and read until I fall asleep."

Severus nodded, glancing again at the book Potter had chosen. He felt himself go still. It was one of the few works of fiction on his shelves. One of the books that Lily had given him.

Severus forced himself to relax. It was not as though that was any surprise. Very few of the books in his library would be of interest to a thirteen year old boy, save the ones that Lily had given to Severus when they were teenagers. This whole damned house was haunted by memories.

"Professor?" Potter asked, tentatively, "Why are there so many Muggle things in your house?"

"My father was a Muggle." replied Severus, shortly.

"So, you did grow up here, then?" the boy asked, interested, "But, you don't talk like anyone around here."

"My mother was a witch. From quite an old family." Severus said, quietly, "I prefer to be known for that in the Wizarding World."

"Did you get on with your parents?" Potter was getting dangerously close to subjects Severus would
rather not speak of.

"I was quite close to my mother." Severus told the boy stiffly, "My father was...a difficult man." Potter looked hard at Severus. If the child had been older, Severus would have suspected him of attempting Legilimency, "Why do you ask, Potter?"

The boy blushed a little and looked away, "You've been...really decent this whole term." he said, "I appreciate it."

"You aren't the first student I've had to temporarily take custody of." Severus assured him, leaving out the fact that Potter was the first student he'd taken permanent custody of.

Potter looked back sharply, "But..."

Severus sighed, "Unfortunately, there are abused children in every group of students. Teachers, especially heads of houses, look for the signs. Longbottom and yourself were, sadly, not spotted. I suspect because all of us," Severus inclined his head, waved his hand vaguely to include all of the adults in Potter's life, "Were not looking properly."

The boy's whole mien changed. He stiffened, shifted forward until he was sitting on the edge of his seat, poised for flight. He put his teacup down and pulled the blanket closer around him, "I'm not like Neville." he whispered. His face was very pale. Severus sincerely hoped he wasn't about to have another attack of his nervous stomach, "Uncle Vernon...he only hit me once in a while. Most of the time he just shouted. It was never...never that bad."

"And depriving a child of food is an acceptable punishment, is it?" Severus couldn't keep the sneer out of his voice, and didn't really try.

"I knew lots of people who got sent to bed without meals." Potter said petulantly.

"One meal." Severus grated. He wished they were back at Hogwarts, where he could send Potter off for a nice chat with Poppy or one of the other professors, "I will guarantee that none of those children ever missed more than one meal. And, more than likely, they were merely deprived of their pudding, rather than the whole meal."

Potter's eyes narrowed, and he seemed on the verge of fleeing, but he wasn't quite in flight, yet.

"While we're at it, referring to a child under your care as a 'freak' is unacceptable among Muggles and wizards, both. Petunia has always been a wretched, spiteful thing." Severus said, darkly. For a moment he wished he'd hexed the both of those horrors who called themselves Vernon and Petunia while he'd had the chance. He remembered Lily's face as she'd told Severus what Petunia had been calling her the summer after their first year.

Potter sighed, "Aunt Petunia just didn't like my magic. She couldn't help being..." the boy paused as though thinking of something, "You said you knew my grandparents? Didn't you?"

"I knew them. Yes. Not well, but they were kind people." replied Severus cautiously.

"You knew my mum, then?" Potter's eyes lifted, looking at Severus hopefully, "You met at Hogwarts?"

"We were in the same year." Severus admitted. A voice inside his head, that sounded remarkably like Lily, berated him for telling half truths to the boy.

"You were friends?" Potter asked.
Severus clenched the hand that wasn't holding his teacup.

The child dropped his eyes and cringed a little, as though he expected to be cuffed. Severus wondered what the child had read in his face. But then, the boy raised his chin, a little defiantly, his teeth set.

"It's very late." croaked Severus around an unaccountable lump in his throat, "Finish your tea, and get to bed." For good measure, he slid the plate of tea biscuits he'd included on the tea tray towards the child, "Eat something. I expect you don't eat enough at dinner and you wake up hungry."

The boy's look of astonishment was again quite comical and Severus found himself having to suppress a smile.
Snape didn't come down for breakfast, the next morning. Harry woke up when the light was just turning from grey to red. He threw one of his jumpers over his pajamas and stuck his feet into the slippers that Snape had insisted on buying him. He quite needed them as he crept down to the kitchen; it was cold in this house.

Yesterday, Harry had taken the liberty of filling the larder with his own favorite foods. Snape hadn't given him a shopping list, so he'd reckoned Snape didn't much care what he bought, as long as he was fed. At least, Snape hadn't complained about the meals Harry served him.

So this morning, it was sausages and eggs for breakfast. With toast and jam. It was almost as good as Hogwarts food, even if Harry did say so himself.

When the tea was made and the sausages finished cooking, Harry took Snape some breakfast up. That was better than lurking around the kitchen, waiting to see if the old bat was going to come down. Snape didn't move as Harry silently padded across the room to put the tray in the breadbox.

After Harry had finished his own breakfast and cleaned the kitchen, he sat at the table wondering what he should do with himself. Inactivity seemed intolerable. Snape hadn't left him with any lists like Petunia would, if she were going to be gone for the day. Harry had read ahead in all his classes and he certainly couldn't take his broom out.

Generally, Harry wasn't one to get lonely. At the Dursleys', being alone meant he got some peace and quiet. At school, he was always surrounded by people. Being alone was actually hard to manage and a mostly welcome respite from the constant jostle of people.

He wished Snuffles could have come with him, again.

At the thought of Snuffles, Harry's chest got tight. Dumbledore had said the dog was gone for good.

As though a bucket of water had been tipped over his head, Harry went cold, even with a warm breakfast in his stomach. Harry suddenly realized what the headmaster had been trying to say.

A sob escaped his lips, before he could stop it. The pressure in his chest made him suck his breath in sharply. He closed his eyes and bent his head to the table, more sobs followed though he desperately tried to swallow them down. The last thing he wanted to happen was to have Snape find him crying.

Harry put his hand over his mouth to stifle his noise, the way he might have at the Dursley's. He hadn't really cried in years.

It didn't matter, he kept telling himself, not at all. He had more important things to be upset about. Neville was dead and Ginny had tried to do herself in. The Weasleys wouldn't be able to take him, and Snape was stuck with him. It didn't matter that his bloody dog was gone too. He still had Hedwig and he'd always looked after himself.

His hands tingled as he tried to fight down his tears. His tea cup, on the table, shook for a moment
before exploding into tiny pieces of ceramic shrapnel, that covered the table and spilled onto the floor.

Harry stared at the pieces. Standing suddenly, he picked up the saucer and flung it against the wall. The sound of the breaking ceramic relieved the pressure in his head. It felt so good, he picked up the plate and flung it too. Another outburst of magic made the teapot crack with a pop. Harry picked up the sugar bowl, just about to fling it too, when the kettle starting whistling.

His magic had apparently heated the water to the boiling point, without the need for a flame. It was the sound of the kettle whistling that brought him to his senses.

His wild anger was abruptly brought to heel by sudden terror. Snape was sure to hear him breaking up his kitchen. Plus, the last time he had done accidental magic, the Minister himself had come looking for Harry. The summer before that, Dobby had gotten him blamed for a hovercharm and Harry had been threatened with expulsion from school.

Harry stood listening, trying to hear over his hammering heart.

There was no sound from upstairs. Perhaps the silencing spells worked between rooms. Maybe Snape was still so exhausted that nothing was going to wake him up.

There was still no broom to be found, so Harry picked up what bits he could find, careful not to cut himself. He wished he dared use his wand, but he expected an owl from the Ministry any second as it was. What would Snape do to him if he was expelled?

The minutes ticked away, but there was no owl from the Ministry swooping in. Perhaps it was going straight to Snape?

Harry realized he was very cold. There was nothing he could do about owls from the Ministry anyway. The dull numbness he'd been feeling since yesterday reasserted itself as his adrenaline faded.

He threw the bits of teacup, saucer and plate into the rubbish, glad that he'd chosen to use the old looking place setting he'd found in the kitchen, rather than the good china he'd found in the small dining room cabinet. He had put Snape's food on that.

The house hadn't gotten any warmer, even with the sun shining through the kitchen window. Harry thought he remembered seeing something that looked like an electric thermostat in the hallway.

He shivered, getting up to look around the short, dark passage. He realized that even yesterday, he hadn't paid much attention to the house.

The kitchen opened onto the hallway, with the front door directly across from it. It had a thin red runner carpet over a wooden floor. The living room door was directly to the left of it, as he faced it and the stairs were facing the front door, with the dining room connecting the kitchen and living room. It actually looked a little like the front passage of the Dursley's house, only in reverse. A small cupboard that Harry hadn't taken any notice of was under the stairs.

Snape was right about one thing; for some reason he kept dwelling on his cupboard. He hadn't even had to sleep in it since he came to Hogwarts, so why was it preying on his mind so? It had never seemed like that big a deal before.

He spotted the small box on the wall, adjusted it up to 20 degrees. He hoped that Snape wouldn't complain that Harry was running the heat too high. At least he wouldn't have to build a fire in every room to make the place warm.
Harry was beginning to feel like Snape's dusty house had hope of becoming habitable, and was sort of glad that Snape was staying out of the way. He still couldn't find a broom to sweep with, but he did find a floor brush under the sink. While he was shopping yesterday, he'd bought a bit of the floor cleaner Petunia favored. Scrubbing the floor would be something to do, for a bit. Before he started on it, he went upstairs, changed into the pair of jeans he wore yesterday and dug out his dragon hide gloves, remembering how harsh the stuff was.

He smiled a bit grimly at himself, as he used the floor brush to attack the stains on the kitchen floor. He'd fallen pretty low to be voluntarily scrubbing a floor, but it was better than sitting around. Trouble was, scrubbing wasn't a task that would consume his brain.

His sleep hadn't been the slightest bit restful and that conversation in the middle of the night with Snape had just been weird. He had not expected to be offered tea and biscuits by the man, ever. Most especially not in the middle of the night. Rather than think about everything else, he distracted himself with the questions last night's conversation had brought up.

Snape had known his mother. Had been friends with his mother, by the sound of it. And he knew Aunt Petunia.

If Snape knew Petunia and his grandparents, it stood to reason that Snape had visited his mother at her house. At least it didn't sound like he'd only met them in passing at the train station.

Snape had never mentioned his mother before.

Mrs. Cook seemed like she might be a good source of information, if Harry made friends with her. Yesterday she had been very kind to Harry, showing him where the shops were. He could have found them himself, but she seemed very interested in talking to Harry. Elderly women often liked Harry, if only because he was polite to them.

Mrs. Cook had also shown Harry where the laundrette was the previous day and he was anxious to get some of his things washed. It would give him an excuse to get out of the house. However, he might get some awkward questions about why he was hanging about if he went out in the morning, when everyone else his age was in school, so it was probably best to wait until later.

It took the better part of the morning to get the floor something approaching clean, but it made the kitchen that much brighter, and he was able to pick up the bits of smashed crockery he'd missed. It was still a sort of grey, but the grime was mostly stripped from it. The sharp smell of the floor cleaner was almost comforting.

When Harry had heard Snape in the shower around noon, he took in the sandwiches he'd made. Snape's bedclothes were tossed around again. The man was sleeping very badly, by the looks of it. Harry wondered if it was a result of the spell he'd used or if the Professor was always a restless sleeper. Quickly, Harry stripped the bed and made it up with fresh sheets he'd found in a linen closet in the hall.

Not a moment too soon. Snape emerged from the bathroom just as Harry was headed back down the stairs. He seemed to be moving with more of his accustomed grace. He was in his dressing gown with his hair damp from the shower.

Snape gave Harry his "potion ingredient" look again, but asked civilly enough, "Are you all right, Potter?"

Harry nodded, glad that Snape hadn't witnessed his earlier bout of tears, and it didn't sound as though he'd heard Harry chucking teacups, "Yes, sir." he mumbled, putting his hands deep in his pockets.
Snape seemed like he was going to say something else, as he watched Harry with narrowed eyes, "What have you been up to?" he asked accusingly, after a minute.


Snape made a noise in his throat, "I just received an owl." he said.

Harry felt himself go white. He stared at Snape, waiting for the axe to fall.

Snape must have seen Harry's reaction because he paused to look at him for a long moment, before continuing, "The Headmaster is going to be here tonight." the trademark Snape-sneer was back. Harry hadn't realized that it had been missing in his dealings with the Potions Master, until it returned, "He wants to 'see how we're getting on'." Apparently, that bothered Snape for some reason, "He'll be here at eight o'clock this evening. Do try to be present." Snape looked Harry up and down, "And presentable." he sneered.

Harry blushed, the knees of his jeans were filthy where he'd been on them scrubbing the floor. They were also the same ones he'd worn yesterday as was his T-shirt, so they were pretty dusty as well. Harry wasn't used to having clothes that it was even noticeable that they were dirty (at least not Muggle clothes).

Harry nodded, "Yessir." he muttered sheepishly.

"I trust you can keep yourself occupied for the afternoon?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, although for perhaps the first time in his life, he was running out of things to do. Harry found he could get the housework done very quickly when there was no Dudley to sabotage him.

He thought he could get started organizing the cookbooks. He'd found that there were about two dozen on a bottom shelf in the kitchen. They were printed on yellowing paper with very ordinary recipes.

In the front of one was an inscription, To my Eileen.

Harry wondered who Eileen might be.

No way he was going to ask Snape.

Harry thought it might be all right if he tidied up the back garden. Mrs Cook was the only one likely to see him-and even she'd have to be looking. Tall hedges obscured the view beyond the stone walls. The house on the other side was empty and an alley was the only thing on the other side of the tall wooden fence that ran across the end of the garden.

Like the rest of the house, it had a feeling of long neglect. A little stone path, over grown with weeds and half buried under soil, led to a dusty garden shed full of cobwebs and rusty tools. Harry had dug through the carelessly piled stack the day before. They were actually decent tools under the grime and rust.

"All right then, Potter." nodded Snape, "I..." he hesitated, "I do appreciate that you have behaved yourself, thus far."

It was odd to hear Snape say something that could be almost interpreted as praise. Snape didn't know about the accidental magic, then. Probably Dumbledore was coming to tell him himself, Harry mused gloomily.
Snape was already looking tired again, "I'll leave you to it." He turned to walk back into his bedroom, pausing at the door. He clicked his tongue and huffed irritably. In a voice, Harry was accustomed to hearing from Potions class, he said, "If you are going to be here, I would expect the Headmaster would appreciate a late supper. However, please remember that not all of us are partial to the overly sweet monstrosities Dumbledore prefers." and he shut his door before he'd even finished his own sentence.

Another hot ball of anger ignited in Harry's stomach. That was a trick of Petunia's, to speak into the air rather than at Harry.

Harry prevented himself from stomping down the stairs, with an effort. Snape was just a git. But that left him wondering what he was going to serve Dumbledore that Snape wouldn't hate.

It didn't matter, Harry had decided by the time he'd showered and changed into something clean. He'd just get frozen meat pies like Petunia did when her book club met. And a fruit tart, and then they could please themselves. Petunia used to say that it didn't matter what you served, as long as it went on the good china.

At four o'clock, Harry had finished the polishing the silver he'd found in the drawer of the dining room cabinet. He really wished Snape had a vaccuum cleaner, but at least the dining room floor was bare wood. He used a cloth to pick up some of the dust. And there was a tablecloth in the drawer as well that Harry put on the table.

He put a note onto the kitchen table, letting Snape know he was out at the shops, just to be safe.

It took him only a little while to find what he was looking for. He bought enough frozen pies that he could serve them for dinner on a night he didn't feel like cooking.

Heading back, he passed by a group of boys playing football in the the park. Harry sighed, wishing he could be playing Quidditch, instead of stuck here.

Mrs. Cook was just getting off her bus as Harry made it to Spinner's End. She saw Harry and smiled widely, reminding Harry of Molly Weasley, "Hello, Harry," she said, juggling several packages.

Harry had his shopping in one bag, "Do you need help?" he asked politely, seizing his chance to be friendly.

"Thank you, dear," smiled the old woman, "So how are you getting on? Been doing some shopping, again? And how is Professor Snape?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Harry replied, "Professor Snape is feeling better, I think." Harry had told Mrs. Cook that Snape was down with a bad flu and that's why Harry was doing the shopping.

"Well, if you need anything, you just come to me, mind." the woman shook her head, "So unfortunate that he had to become so ill when he had you to look after. I hope you're not sitting in front of the telly eating crisps all day."

Harry hastened to reassure her, "The Headmaster's coming to visit this evening to check on us. And Professor Snape doesn't own a telly, but he's got loads of books." the last thing Harry needed was Mrs. Cook inquiring too closely about Snape and Snape's house.

She nodded, "I'm not surprised. He was the same as a boy, you know. And his mum, Eileen, was such a brilliant woman."

One mystery solved, Harry thought, now there was only about a hundred more to go.
"Of course, his father, Toby, worked at the mill, but we all knew that Severus was far too clever for that. And then, I don't think Eileen's would have been happy with that, either. I have an idea that her family was a bit posh, you see. We were never sure where Eileen came from. She never said, but she was a sweet girl, for all that." Mrs. Cook paused for breath, "But listen to me, I'm sure none of this interests you, dear. You're very tolerant of an old lady."

Harry gave her a smile, "No, it is interesting. Professor Snape never talks about himself."

As they came to her door, she fumbled around in her bag for her keys, "I'll make us some tea, shall I? Or is the Professor expecting you straight back?"

Harry shook his head, "That'd be great." he said, sincerely. Now that he had someone to give him some information, he wasn't going to let her stop.

She took off her coat and put it in the hall closet, and turned to take Harry's, then beckoned him into the kitchen.

Mrs. Cook's house was built on the same basic plan as Professor Snape's, but it was in immaculate order. She led him into the kitchen which was much more modern and up to date that the one next door. She indicated the table to Harry, "Just put the things there, then." she said.

Harry put her packages on the table, taking a seat.

Mrs. Cook busied herself with the teapot, "So are your parents abroad, or something? Is that why you're staying with Professor Snape?"

Harry was tempted to just say "yes", but then all kinds of questions would follow, "No." he told her quietly, "My parents died years ago. Car wreck."

Mrs. Cook turned from the sink to give him a sympathetic glance, "Oh, I'm sorry dear." she said.

"I used to live with my Aunt and Uncle, but they had to go away. They couldn't take me." Harry thought that sounded better than saying they didn't want him back. A lump came to his throat at the thought of that.

"Used to live?" Mrs. Cook was still looking at him.

Harry felt his cheeks get hot, as he went over what he just said in his head, "Well, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon...they..." Harry stumbled over his words, horrified to realize that his eyes had started to overflow. He didn't know what was wrong with him.

Mrs. Cook turned back to the sink and washed some cups left in there. Harry took a few breaths, swiped at his cheeks.

After a moment, Mrs. Cook said, "I knew a Petunia once." she spoke slowly as though thinking something through, "Your mum...would her name have been Lily?"

Harry started, "Yes. How did you know?"

"I thought you looked a bit like an Evans." She sounded satisfied.

"Sorry?"

She turned back to look at him, "An Evans, dear." She looked at him a little oddly, "I can't imagine there would be two other sisters named Petunia and Lily. And, I heard Lily was killed in a car
wreck." the last was said very gently.

Aunt Petunia never told Harry about his grandparents.

The old woman went on, "They lived two streets over. Mr. Evans was a foreman at the mill for years. Vi and I were great friends. She got friendly with Eileen next door, when Lily was chosen to go to the same school as Severus. Professor Snape, I should say." She smiled at Harry, "Well, I daresay, that explains why you came home with Professor Snape."

"It does?" asked Harry, confused.

"Oh, yes. Severus and Lily were inseparable. For years. I know that Toby...that was Professor Snape's father...sort of hoped it would turn into something more," she paused, "But, Severus was never one to be involved with girls. I imagine his studies kept him occupied."

Harry's mind whirled.

Inseparable? Snape and his mum?

But, Mrs. Cook was continuing, "Haven't seen Petunia since she married. She was always one to put on airs. She was friends with my Angie until she left school. Of course it was hard for her, after her mam and da died. Lily was still at school and they had the most dreadful argument at the funeral. Lily cleared out that night and Petunia put the house up for sale. Petunia never spoke to Angie much, after she married. I think she was ashamed of where she came from, to be honest. We only found out that Lily died because Angie ran into her once, when she was up in Surrey." Mrs. Cook looked at Harry with sudden comprehension, "Oh, and I remember now-Angie said how put upon Petunia was that she got landed taking care of her nephew."

Harry just stared at the woman not knowing what to say.

A firm knock at the door saved Harry from having to reply.

"Oh, excuse me, dear." Mrs. Cook said as she went to go get the door.

The door opened, and Harry heard Mrs. Cook say, "Well, hello Severus. So nice to see you."

Harry closed his eyes, wondering how much trouble he'd be in. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cook." he heard Snape say, stiffly, "Is my student here?"

'Why, yes he is. I was just making a cup of tea, why don't you come in?" Mrs Cook replied.

Snape answered, "Thank you, but I'm afraid we don't have the time, just at the moment."

"Ah, yes, Harry did say you were expecting company this evening." she paused, to ask Snape something in a low voice that Harry didn't catch.

Harry stood up, moving closer to the door, to hear what they were saying, "A conversation for another time." Snape replied, almost as softly. He raised his voice, "Mr. Potter? Come along, the Headmaster will be here early. He just phoned." there was the slightest of hesitation before Snape said the word "phoned".

"Yes, sir." replied Harry, sighing. He was glad he'd decided to do frozen pies, if the Headmaster was going to turn up early.

Snape stood on the steps in a black jumper and his wool trousers, still leaning heavily on his cane.
His hair was pulled back again. Harry had to think it was because in Muggle clothes, if Snape wore his hair falling about his shoulders, as he usually did, it would make him look like an aging hippy.

Harry must have smirked involuntarily at that thought, because the Professor scowled at him and said, "Something amusing you, Potter?"

Harry shook his head, "No, sir." he replied meekly.

Snape made a noncommittal sound in his throat, turning back to Mrs. Cook, he said, "I hope he hasn't been troublesome."

"No, no. He helped me bring my shopping back. And it's so nice to meet one of Violet's grandchildren." the woman cheerfully replied.

Snape looked at her sharply, "I beg your pardon?"

She smiled more widely, "Now Severus, it's not as though the boy doesn't look like an Evans. With those eyes? You can't miss it."

Snape gazed beadily at Harry for a second, then completely floored Harry by smiling a little at the woman, "No, I suppose one can't."

"Well, get on with you both." She said, kindly, "But, why don't you come over for tea on Sunday? I'd love the company."

Snape cleared his throat, "If we're still here. It's quite possible we'll be returning to school before then."

"Of course." she nodded, looking a trifle disappointed, "Well, just let me know." she said recovering.

Harry grabbed his shopping from off the floor.

They didn't speak until they were inside Snape's house. Harry couldn't gauge how much trouble he was in. Stony silences were so common with Snape.

The minute they were in the door, Snape rounded on him, "What the hell were you thinking?" he hissed, "Have you no sense of caution? Are you trying to get killed?" He didn't wait for Harry to reply, "You have a powerful dark wizard after your blood. What were you thinking?"

"Erm," Harry began, as the Professor turned to walk into the living room, and sit down heavily in the armchair, "She...ah...she did ask me to come in. She was really nice. I thought it would be rude not to. I didn't say anything..."

"She could have easily been Sirius Black, polyjuiced or she could have been Imperiused by him. Are you so starved for affection that you follow the first person who says a kind word to you into their home?" Snape continued to glower at him.

Harry couldn't think of a thing to say. It never occurred to him that he could be in danger from an old lady. Snape always managed to make him feel utterly pathetic.

"I...no sir," Harry replied quietly.

Snape closed his eyes. Harry guessed that he was lucky that Snape still seemed so debilitated. It seemed like he didn't even have the strength to give Harry a proper telling off. Snape opened his eyes to fix Harry with a glare, "Go. Get out of my sight, until the headmaster comes." he growled.
Harry nodded, quickly. He took the things to the kitchen, hastily turning the oven on and putting the frozen pies in them. He put the tart in the fridge. If the Dumbledore didn't show up by the time they were ready, Harry would retrieve the breadbox from Snape's room to keep them warm.

He put a kettle on, thinking perhaps the Professor could do with some tea. That sometimes worked with Petunia, if not Vernon.

He heard Snape moving around in the dining room, "I assume someone taught you to count?" Snape called loudly, "There are going to be three of us here tonight."

Harry had set two place settings at the dining table, assuming that Snape wouldn't want him eating supper with them.

Harry nearly went in to ask Snape about it, but then he remembered that Snape said he wanted Harry out of his sight. Harry wasn't stupid enough to question the man's orders to his face.

And then, Snape said, "If I have my way, this will be your last evening here. I'll have the Headmaster take you in hand, and you can work in the kitchens at school."

Well, thought Harry irritably, So much for "Our home". That didn't take long. Ungrateful git.

For some reason, the thought of going back to Hogwarts with the Headmaster didn't make Harry as happy as it should have. He was tired of other people sending him here and there. He also remembered what Molly Weasley had said the other morning, about Dumbledore sending him to the Dursleys in the first place.

Harry's stomach was bubbling with hot, acid anger again. He waited until he heard Snape's footsteps go up the stairs, before he went into the dining room to lay another place at the table.
The Headmaster comes to check on our boys.

It had frightened Severus more than he liked to admit, to wake up and find the boy gone, with only a note left on the table that said,
Gone down the shops. H-

Granted, he'd told the boy he could go out, but at half past five, Severus sat in the kitchen, tapping his fingers on the table with irritation; and yes, fear. He sat, trying to tell himself he was being stupid. Since he'd cast that bloody spell, his emotions had been all over the place. If he hadn't been an accomplished occlumens, he'd have indulged in several unseemly displays.

There was no denying it, Severus ached inside. As well as dreaming of Lily, he had relived saving the Weasley girl, in his sleep, today.

In his dream, he and Poppy and Minerva had held hands and he had cast that incantation. This time, he had felt something indefinable spin out from his heart to be caught by some...Thing. In the eternity between one heartbeat and the next he'd been asked a question and he had given an answer. A terrible stretching and then tearing, as though of a hand being torn from an arm. Pain so bright and sharp that he'd assumed he'd die of it.

It wasn't just a dream, he knew that. Now, he could remember what it was like. He could remember opening his eyes. Being astonished that the pain was not physical. Being jubilant that it had worked, that their magic had been enough. For some reason, in the immediate aftermath, that had gotten lost in his mind.

A piece of himself was missing and it ached. He wondered if he'd ever really be rid of the pain of it.

He shook himself out of his maudlin thoughts. Looking around the immaculate kitchen again, he said to the unseen house elf, "You needn't get comfortable. As soon as Dumbledore gets here, he's taking you with him."

The elf was stubbornly hiding from him. Severus had called every house elf name that he knew, and tried a few words that could be house elf names, but no joy. It was possible Dumbledore had sent the creature with specific orders to avoid Severus.

At quarter to six, Severus pulled the fob watch from his pocket. Rather than "Shops", the hand was pointing to "Socializing".

Irritated, Severus pointed his wand at it, "Locus filius"

The hand of the watch turned slowly, until it had circled the entire face. The word "Socializing" was replaced with "Next door."

What on earth Potter could be interested in over there was beyond Severus. The old woman next door was harmless, but that didn't mean anything. Although the watch wasn't pointing to "Mortal
Peril", there were other types of peril in the world. Spinner's End was secure, but there was no place in Britain that was entirely safe for Potter, Severus thought.

Before Severus could do anything about it, a tapping at the window announced the arrival of an owl. Severus pointed his wand and opened the window.

It was one of the school owls,

Severus,

I will be at your home earlier than I had anticipated. Please, look for me around half past six.

Albus.

"Damn," muttered Snape to himself. Well, at least he could get rid of the bloody house elf that much sooner.

It took him only a moment to retrieve Potter. Severus was disconcerted that Mrs. Cook had surmised the boy's identity so quickly. But she was right, those green eyes were an Evans trait. Lily's father had eyes as green. If one didn't know the boy's presumed father, it was much more obvious, Severus supposed.

As usual, Severus had no success keeping his temper with the child. How could someone who had confronted the Dark Lord twice in two years and was being pursued by a dark wizard reputed to be almost as powerful (although Severus doubted the veracity of that claim) have so much disregard for their own safety?

The boy's face turned white, then flushed with anger at Severus characterization of him as "affection starved". With an effort, Severus reined in his tongue, he wasn't trying to alienate the boy, but it was mad for him to go wandering into places where he was putting himself in danger. Obviously Severus had come too close to the truth.

Ashamed, Severus sent the boy out of his sight, before he could say anything else he'd regret.

He heard Potter go into the kitchen rather than upstairs, where Snape had expected him to go. Likely the boy had made friends with the cursed house elf. They all tended to be fond of children, if the child was not cruel to them.

Kindness was another Evans trait, although the gene for kindness had apparently skipped over Petunia. Even before he had discovered the truth about the child's home life, Severus knew that Potter didn't tend toward cruelty.

"He's got a given name, Sev. You should try using it" Lily's angry voice said in his head.

Wonderful, he was hearing her when he was awake now, as well.

Severus went into the dining room to see if the elf had laid the table. Naturally, the damned thing had found his mother's china and silver. There were only two place setting. Most likely because the elf thought (or perhaps hoped) the boy would eat in the kitchen. Severus told (shouted at it, really) it to set the table for three, instead. Severus didn't ordinarily shout at the house elves, but this one was more stubborn than they usually were. It irritated him no end that this elf wouldn't show itself.

Severus glanced at his watch. It was quarter after six and Dumbledore was almost always punctual. Severus really didn't feel like climbing the stairs again, they kept feeling as though someone was putting a stretching charm on them. Severus supposed that he could greet the headmaster in his
Muggle clothes, but that felt undignified. This weakness was undignified enough.

As he reached the top of the stairs, Severus saw that the boy’s bedroom door was half open. Out of curiosity, Severus poked his head in to see how the the child kept the place.

The snowy owl was still sat on her perch, dozing. It looked like Potter (Harry!) hadn't bothered to unpack, really. His trunk stood open with a stack of clean clothes in it. A small pile of dirty clothes lay to the side of it on the floor. Dragon hide gloves were thrown on top of the desk. Severus hoped like hell the boy wasn't amusing himself with illicit potions experiments.

He took a practiced sniff of the air. Lemon and ammonia. He ran through the noxious, dangerous or explosive compounds one could make with ammonia. None of them used lemons. Floor cleaner came to mind.

There were some quills and parchment sitting on the desk, but otherwise there was nothing personal in the room. None of the knick-knacks or oddments boys of his age tended to collect around themselves. Just his owl and a broom leaning in the corner. That spoke of the poverty of the child’s life with the Dursley’s. Even Severus had owned more than the clothes on his back when he started Hogwarts.

The bed was neatly made and Severus wondered if the boy made the bed himself or if the house elf did it. Severus saw now that sheets were included on the clothes pile. That seemed oddly fastidious for a thirteen year old, to change sheets after one had slept in them for two nights, so perhaps Severus’ shouting had interrupted the house elf in the middle of tidying in here.

Shaking his head, Severus turned back to his own room.

In a moment, he was making his halting way back down the stairs. The front doorbell rang.

"I'll answer it." he called, forestalling the damned elf.

He opened the door to a smiling Dumbledore, "Headmaster." Severus said, coldly, by way of greeting.

"Severus." Dumbledore still smiled at him broadly, but there were lines under the man’s eyes. He looked tired. No doubt, Molly Weasley and the Ministry had been keeping him busy.

"Well, come in." Severus said, curtly. He didn't feel like being polite; sometime in the night he’d decided that Dumbledore's good will wasn't that important to him anymore.

If Severus' shortness bothered him, Dumbledore gave no sign. The tea tray was already sitting on the coffee table, when they went into the living room.

"You've changed things." remarked Dumbledore, looking around interestingly.

"It was too cold when the front door opened directly into the living room." Severus replied stiffly, sinking down gratefully onto the chair. Severus wondered if it would be safe to use stronger stimulants now. He'd not had the chance to read on the spell, "So, what is it you wanted?" Severus asked, getting right to the point.

Dumbledore sat on the settee and with a glance for permission, which Severus granted with a slight nod, poured the tea.

Not until a cup of hot sugary tea was in Severus' hand, did Dumbledore say, "As I said, I wanted to see how you and Harry are getting on."
"Remarkably well, as you see." replied Severus dryly, "He hasn't blown up my house and I haven't chopped him into potion ingredients. Given the past two years, I imagine you believe that's the best we can do."

Dumbledore smiled at that, "Where is Harry?"

Severus sipped at his tea, "Last I saw of him, he was in the kitchen. Probably complaining about me to the house elf you sent us."

Seldom had Severus seen the headmaster look so blank, "I haven't sent you a house elf, Severus. I know how you feel about them following you home." Dumbledore's white eyebrows furrowed for a moment, "Perhaps, Pomona asked one to come check on you."

"Whatever the case, I haven't changed my feelings. I would like you to take this one back to the castle with you." Severus said firmly.

"Yes, of course, Severus." replied the headmaster amicably, "I should think..."

The door between the living room and the dining room banged open with much more force than necessary.

Severus and Dumbledore both jumped. Potter stood in the doorway, his arms crossed across his chest and his lips compressed to white lines, "Dinner's on the table." he gritted.

Severus was too tired to remonstrate the boy for slamming doors. For the moment he decided to ignore it. It would only make the boy more hostile.

Slowly, Severus stood and waved Dumbledore to precede him into the dining room. A third place setting had been added, with several serving dishes in the center. Potter walked into the kitchen and returned with a butter dish. Placing it on the table with slightly more force than necessary.

There was no wine on the table, but that was likely because the elf had realized that Severus shouldn't be drinking wine just now. There was a glass of something dark and fizzy at the chair Potter took. Severus thought it looked familiar, but he couldn't think what it was, for a second. His mind was moving rather more slowly than usual.

"Er," Potter began softly, after the two adults took their seats, "Would anyone else like a Coke?" obviously he'd noticed Severus looking.

Oh, of course, the universal drink of Muggle teenagers, "Have one, Albus." remarked Severus, "They're more than a third sugar. Just the sort of thing you like," his mind must be moving very slowly indeed.

Dumbledore's eyes lit up his face, "That sounds wonderful, Harry."

Instead of calling for the house elf, Potter jumped up to fetch it himself, coming back with another dark fizzy glass.

Potter again waited for the adults to start serving themselves before he started, casting some rather odd furtive looks at them.

"This is very good. Unusual," remarked Dumbledore, taking a bite of his pie, "A recipe of yours Severus?"

Severus shook his head. The food was actually rather heavier on the salt than he was used to.
"They're frozen." muttered the boy, not lifting his head from his dinner plate, although his shoulders relaxed at the headmaster's approval.

"Frozen?" Dumbledore glanced in confusion at Severus and poked at the steaming pie with his fork.

The child nodded, still not looking up, "You get them from the supermarket. That's a Muggle thing, sir. They have already made up food, and then they freeze it. You pop it in the oven. Bit of a cheat, but my pastry's rubbish, anyway." the child shrugged.

Dumbledore gave the boy an understanding glance, "I imagine familiar foods are a comfort in a new environment."

The child shook his head, "I've never had this before." he gave Severus another one of those furtive looks, "Professor Snape said I could get what I wanted. Aunt Petunia never let me have any of Dudley's, so I thought I'd try some."

"Some..?" Severus had missed the noun in there, somewhere.

"Coke."

"Petunia never allowed you to have a Coke?" Severus asked, slowly. Good lord, the stuff was cheaper than milk and twice as common. Not something he'd want the child drinking every day of course, but...

"She said they were for Dudley. And she didn't need to pay for getting my teeth fixed." shrugged Potter.

"Why on earth would she need to pay for that?" Severus stared at him, certain now that he was misunderstanding, "She just always said I was too expensive, without needing fillings and glasses and all sorts of things." replied Potter, poking at his dinner with his fork.

Severus had heard enough, "I believe you are laboring under a misapprehension." he said in a low voice, "The system pays for those things. It seems that Petunia couldn't open her mouth without a lie coming out." Severus would wager that Petunia wanted to keep Harry away from professionals because the boy might reveal something she didn't want revealed. He gave Dumbledore a dark look.

"Oh." the boy replied.

The headmaster cleared his throat, "So these pies are ones you prefer, then? That the house elf prepared these rather than it's usual recipe?" he asked.

Potter looked at the headmaster blankly, "House elf?"

"Yes, Potter. House elf." Severus rolled his eyes, exasperated, "The one who followed us here, most likely due to your presence. The one who scrubbed the kitchen and dusted the living room. And who's going back with the Headmaster tonight."

Potter stared at Severus as though wondering about his sanity, "Er...there's only us here, Professor." he said slowly.

"Only us..?" Severus remembered the state of the boy's clothes this morning. He'd assumed the child had found something to entertain himself in the back garden to get so filthy. "Do you mean to tell me that you've been doing all of this?" Severus waved his hand vaguely at the clean house. Disbelief
clear in his voice.

"Erm...Yeah." the boy sounded irritated now, "Who else would it be?" he asked angrily.

"Watch your tone, Potter." snapped Severus, automatically, "Are you saying you've been cooking as well?"

"And doing the shopping. And cleaning the bathroom. And dusting the books. And cleaning the china. And polishing the silver. And changing your sheets. Your kitchen floor looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years. I couldn't even find a broom. I would have done the laundry, if I'd have had time," the boy snapped right back.

Severus opened his mouth again and then closed it, thinking of the dragon hide gloves that smelled of floor cleaner, the knees of his jeans that were absolutely filthy. The boy hadn't even used a mop on the floor, he'd scrubbed it.

Before he could say anything else, Dumbledore smiled at the boy and said, "Well, Harry, I'm sure Professor Snape appreciates it." he paused, "And one or two housekeeping spells certainly aren't noticeable in a wizard's house, as I'm sure Fred and George have told you." he finished conspiratorially.

The child turned an indignant gaze on the headmaster now, "You think I need magic to clean a house?" Potter sounded insulted.

"Oh, well, I don't think that anyone would be annoyed" Dumbledore said placatingly.

The boy was in no mood to be placated, "I'm not completely stupid." he muttered, poking at his food some more.

"Of course not, Harry." said Dumbledore, gently, "No one thinks that, but you've only been here two days. It would be very difficult for one boy to do all this without some help, after all."

Severus could tell this was the wrong tactic, when the boy's expression darkened.

"I've been keeping house for Aunt Petunia since I was four." the child hissed, "I don't need magic to clean a house, even one as filthy as this one." the boy put his fork down with a slam.

Severus saw the child's tell-tale trembling. He wondered which one of the boy's displays they were about to be treated to.

"Potter." said Severus softly, "Calm yourself."

The child laughed. An eerie, out of control sound, "Or what? You'll throw me out? You're already going to do that. No one can stand having me around for very long." Potter rose to his feet, "You said you'd have the headmaster take me back to school so I could work in the kitchens there. That's fine with me. I don't know why you brought me here in the first place!"

"No, I'm not, Potter." Severus again tried to match the child's emotion with calm, it seemed to help the other times he'd become overwrought, "I was speaking to the house elf I assumed was here. It's happened before."

He remembered Potter jumping up to get him coffee in the hospital wing. It had occurred to him then that the child behaved like a house elf. He also remembered the child saying something about being struck with a frying pan when he'd burned dinners. And the detentions where he'd made the child scrub the dungeons without magic. Not a word of complaint had the child given, unlike his partner in
crime. In fact, the first time, Severus would have believed that Potter had used magic to scrub the cauldrons if he hadn't had charms that warned him of exactly that sort of cheating in detentions.

Inwardly, Severus cursed himself for a fool.

Potter's eyes were flashing, "It doesn't matter." he growled, giving a sort of angry shrug.

"Calm down now, Harry. Let's talk about this." Dumbledore said gently.

"There's nothing to talk about," the child was white with fury now, he stood up, taking two steps towards the door, "I'm fine. I'll just pack my bloody things and we..."

"Harry, if you're unhappy with Professor Snape, of course we can make other arrangements, but we need to discuss what we need to do next." Dumbledore.

Severus wanted to reach over and strangle Dumbledore. Of course the boy was unhappy with him, but what unsuitable arrangement did Dumbledore have in mind now? Didn't he see that the child needed something resembling stability in his life?

Apparently Potter wasn't impressed either, "Discuss it? You mean you've already decided! You...you..." the hyperventilation started to get the better of the child for a moment.

"Mr. Potter" Severus stood now himself, trying to get control of the situation.

Predictably, the boy flinched. The two glasses on the table exploded and one of the empty chairs threw itself between the boy and Dumbledore.

The boy turned to flee out the door behind him, but Severus had his wand out and the door locked too quickly for that.

Dumbledore calmly started to summon the shards of glass together to repair them.

"Oh don't bother." said Severus, retaking his seat "I hated those glasses." he waved his wand to vanish them instead. His head was pounding.

The boy stood by the kitchen door, shaking. Neither of the adult wizards said anything for a few seconds.

"Sit down." Severus told the boy, "Please." Dumbledore didn't smile, but his eyes crinkled. Severus wanted to hit him.

The boy came back and perched on the edge of his chair. Ready to flee, duck or dodge at any second.

"Severus, be careful." warned Lily's voice in Severus' head.

Lily's eyes stared at him from behind gold frames, narrowed and angry.

"Now, Harry, you are understandably upset by all of the events of the last few days. Perhaps we..." Dumbledore started again, but Potter decided he wasn't going to to listen to whatever the headmaster had to say.

"I'm not upset." he said flatly, "I'm fine."

"Yes, of course, Potter. That would be why your magic is rising up in your defense." observed Severus, sardonically. It was unnerving the way the child could turn his hysteria off like that.
Unnerving, because it spoke to the extreme stress the child was under.

Potter jumped to his feet again, reached over and threw his plate against the wall, "I'M FINE. Much you bloody care, anyway!" this was directed at the headmaster, Severus was surprised to see, He thought that surely he'd be on the receiving end of the vitriol "I heard what Mrs. Weasley said! And the Minister said you told him I had to go there! I t-told him what would happen. And he just told Uncle Vernon I needed more d-discipline. Told him you said so! Why do you care now?"

The child turned to flee again, yanking on the doorknob. Severus, having no interest in trapping himself with a child in that state, waved his wand to unlock it.

The headmaster's face was colorless. Severus stood, walked over to the sideboard and pulled a bottle of firewhiskey out of it, "Do you want a glass, or shall we just finish what's left of the bottle?" he asked Dumbledore.

The older man closed his eyes for a few seconds. Severus pulled out a glass and splashed some firewhiskey into it, shoved it into the old man's hand.

"Minerva is none too pleased with me, either." sighed Dumbledore, opening his eyes.

Severus poured himself a drink, sat himself back down, "I suppose I had better go speak to him, in a moment."

Dumbledore nodded, "I fear my presence here may make things more difficult for you."

Severus bit back a sarcastic retort.

"Am I right in assuming that his being taken back to the Dursley's precipitated an escalation in their hostilities towards him?"

"I believe so, headmaster." Severus replied stiffly.

"And keeping house for Petunia..? What do you suppose that means?" Dumbledore asked, gravely.

"It means that you gave Petunia her own personal house elf." rasped Severus, feeling like a complete idiot. The things he'd been seeing for two days that he hadn't taken a blind bit of notice of were rising up in his mind now.

The old wizard sipped at his drink, "It seems that many of the decisions I've made in regard to Harry have been the wrong ones." He was silent for a minute, "I really did think that Petunia would look after the boy. She is his family after all." he said.

"That was pure chance." replied Severus caustically, "Genetic relationships do not give people instantaneous mystical bonds. People give entirely too much weight to blood."

Dumbledore nodded, "Perhaps they do," he gave Severus a significant glance.

Severus took a deep breath, framing his words in the most courteous way possible, "Given that the boy is legally my ward, I do hope you understand when I say he needs some stability in his life. Unless Molly Weasley is suddenly available to take on this responsibility, I will not relinquish it to anyone else."

"Oh, but surely, Severus, there are others who..."

Severus cut the headmaster off, "Whom the boy trusts?" It was actually upsetting to say this to the
headmaster, because Severus knew that Dumbledore was indeed trying to make the boy's life easier.

"You think he trusts you, do yo
?
" asked Dumbledore, the slightest of smiles around the edges of his mouth and eyes.

"Enough to throw a tantrum in my dining room. Enough that his magic defended him against you rather than myself." Severus pointed out, finishing his drink.

Dumbledore smiled, the twinkle was back in his eyes, more fully than any time since Longbottom died, "That is something to build on, then."
Harry and Severus come to a slightly deeper understanding.

Harry sat on the floor of the kitchen against the wall, right by the door to the dining room, with his knees pulled up to his chest and his head leaned back against the wall. His breathing was harsh and raspy, his heart thudding in his ears.

The back door wouldn't open for him, as he'd discovered when he tried it a moment ago. He wasn't thinking about where he'd go, just that he needed to get away. When the door turned out locked, he'd tried an *alohomora* on it. It hadn't moved at all. The two men hadn't come out of the other room, so Harry slipped down the passage to the front door. That was also locked.

Harry took a quick look at the watch he wore. It read "After curfew". Snape had obviously planned this out. And there wasn't going to be any rescue by the Weasleys, this time.

Neither Snape nor Dumbledore were following him now, so he just posted himself by the door to try to listen to them.

He was in so much trouble. This was exactly like what had happened with Marge. He just lost it. Once he might have believed the headmaster would take up for him, but after what had happened this summer, his faith in Dumbledore was pretty well shot.

He couldn't imagine what they'd do with him, now. Perhaps an orphanage like Vernon and Petunia had always threatened. Did they have those in the Wizarding world? No, they couldn't send The Boy Who Lived to an orphanage. Perhaps a Muggle one, then.

He held his breath, straining to hear the men's conversation, they were speaking softly, but neither had put up a silencing charm.

He heard Snape tell Dumbledore that he wouldn't let Harry go to anyone else but the Weasleys.

That gave Harry the oddest feeling. Something like shock, and then a weird sort of warmth. The realization that Snape had kept every promise he'd ever made to Harry.

He was the only one who ever had, really.

Snape was still an unpleasant bastard, but he was reliable. What had he said that time when he'd taken Harry to Hogsmeade?

"This is not nice, this is responsible." Snape had said.

Snape didn't like him, but he didn't like Ginny either, and he'd done that spell that obviously debilitated him so much. From whispers around the school, the night Neville died, Snape had spent all night trying to save Neville's life.

Why couldn't he have done the same thing with Neville that he'd done with Ginny? That was a question Harry filed away for future contemplation.
In the meantime, it didn't matter that Snape didn't care about Harry. Snape had said that Harry wasn't the first student he'd had to take care of. It seemed that Snape cared about the students and was serious about being responsible for them. He'd replaced Harry's glasses and clothes without a word of complaint. The shopkeepers in Hogsmeade hadn't even batted an eye to see him doing that, so he'd done it before.

More than that, Snape cared about keeping his word; he had kept his promise not to inform the Ministry about the issues with the Dursleys. Now, he was keeping his promise that he would only transfer the guardian rights or whatever to the Weasleys.

It wasn't like having someone who wanted him, but Harry would take what he could get. He was tired of people who smiled to his face and then ordered his life as they pleased, not ever checking to see what Harry wanted or needed. Dumbledore had sent him to the Dursleys, after all.

Harry tried not to think too much about that.

Harry heard the two men stand. Noiselessly, Harry darted out into the passage and up the front stairs, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping.

Hedwig had already flown off to hunt, Harry was disappointed to see. He closed his bedroom door, careful not to make a sound.

He threw himself down on the bed, not bothering to turn on his light. The light from the streetlamp outside illuminated the room sufficiently. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, thinking about how he'd shouted at the headmaster and Snape. He'd thrown Snape's dishes around the dining room and broken drinking glasses with his magic. No doubt that Snape wasn't happy with him.

The bed was shaking...no, it was he who was shaking. Shaking hard enough to shake the bed. He closed his eyes, turning onto his side and pulling the blanket over him, feeling like he wanted to hide. He tried to tell himself he was not going to cry. There was no reason to cry and he wasn't a baby any more.

It wasn't much use, so instead he burrowed into his blankets, muffled his noise with his pillow and just gave in.

His tears never lasted long, and he had learned, when he was tiny, to do it quietly. Vernon and Petunia would never put up with it. They always said, "Stop your crying or I'll give you something to cry about." If the threat didn't shut him up, a smack or a flip around his ear would surely follow.

A long time later, it seemed, he heard the front door open and shut. Harry's cheeks had dried and he was lying in his bed, considering whether he should bother to change into pajamas, or at least slip off his jeans and socks.

Slow footsteps mounted the stairs. Harry hoped that Snape was headed back to bed. He curled tighter into himself, pulling the blanket over his head.

There was a soft knock at the door. Harry ignored it, willing the man to just go away. Perhaps if Snape thought him asleep, he'd hold off on punishing Harry for what he'd just said to Dumbledore until the morning.

The door opened quietly.

Harry held himself stiffly. Wondering when the shouting would begin. He felt the man staring at him, not saying a word for a long time. Harry stubbornly remained curled up on himself, he resolved he wouldn't even look at Snape, until he had to. However, long minutes ticked by and Harry wasn't
sure the man was still there. Perhaps Snape had gone off to his own room without Harry hearing him?

Finally, unable to stand it, he lifted his head off the pillow. Snape stood there in the doorway, leaning against the side. Not saying anything at all, his grave expression half hidden in shadow.

"What?" Harry hated the rough quaver in his voice and he was unable to suppress a snuffle before he spoke. He held his breath, waiting for Snape's sharp voice to outline his faults and to mete out punishments.

"You didn't eat much." Snape replied softly, "I still don't want you missing meals." he sounded almost gentle.

That wasn't what Harry expected, "Not hungry." Harry tried to growl, but it came out as more of a whine. He put his head back down on the bed and screwed his eyes shut.

A sigh and the sound of a chair being pulled across the floor. Harry kept his eyes tightly shut. If he'd have spoken to any of Vernon's friends like that, he would have already gotten the belt. He didn't expect that from Snape, anymore, but he was at least going to be cleaning cauldrons until the end of the year.

A hand came to rest gently on his shoulder. Harry flinched a little, but Snape didn't take his hand away.

The hand on his shoulder seemed to undo him, in a way that all Snape's snarking, sarcasm and detentions had never done. Harry gasped in a breath that turned into a sob on the exhale. To Harry's utter horror, another sob followed and then another. It felt like some outside force was tearing these sounds from him. The hand on his shoulder never moved, but grasped his shoulder firmly.

That was it for the remains of Harry's self control, it seemed. His sobs grew louder and he took great shuddering gulps of air that didn't help at all.

Snape's hand still didn't move.

Harry just couldn't stop. He wasn't even sure what he was crying for, after a few minutes. Finally, the hand withdrew, but before Harry could pull himself together, the bed dipped as the man sat beside him.

"Move over a bit." Snape whispered, picking up his long legs to stretch out them out on the bed, while he leaned his back against the headboard.

Completely nonplussed, Harry scooted over, taking his whole blanket cocoon with him.

An arm snaked behind Harry's shoulders Snape gathered Harry's unresisting body, blankets and all, against his side.

Harry had no memory of ever being touched this way. Hermione hugged him all the time, of course, and Mrs. Weasley always greeted him and sent him off with a hug. Occasionally on of the teachers who were fond of him went so far as to pat him on the shoulder. Once, when he was in primary school, the nurse had held him on her lap after a particularly bad weekend.

His trembling grew more pronounced and everything from the past summer and autumn seemed to gather into one huge, suffocating ball of misery in his chest. The sobs clawed their way out, no matter that Harry tried to swallow them down.
Snape didn't say anything, he just continued to hold Harry as though he were a much younger child. Harry was beyond shame, only aware that he couldn't bear to part with this warm, human contact. This seemed to bring a relief that Harry had never felt before. A sense that he wasn't alone in the world, feeling he could not remember ever having, even at Hogwarts. It didn't matter that Snape would probably rake him over the coals come morning.

After a while, Harry's sobs quieted. Snape pulled a handkerchief from somewhere, handing it to Harry without speaking.

Harry stole a glance at the potion master. Snape still looked dead tired, his eyes closed, but he wasn't sleeping, his arm was still tight around Harry.

Harry drew back and Snape let him, but his dark eyes opened to look at Harry.

"Better?" Snape asked, quietly.

Harry nodded, wiping his eyes and blowing his nose.

"Would you like something to eat?" Snape wouldn't let that go, apparently.

Harry shook his head, "Not hungry." he replied.

Snape sighed, looking resigned, "Will you at least have a cup of tea?"

Harry nodded.

The man pulled out his wand and gave it a wave. The tea tray appeared on the desk. Snape stood and walked over to pour, "I'm going to put some calming draught in." He told Harry, still speaking quietly, "I'd like you to get some decent sleep, at least."

Harry pulled himself up to sit with his feet on the floor, still wrapped in all the blankets from the bed. Snape handed him the tea, poured himself a cup. He sat back down on the chair, so that they faced each other.

Harry sipped at the tea which was heavily sugared and had an undertone of something like old socks in it. He kept drinking it.

Snape sat back in his chair, studying Harry. He crossed his legs and put his elbows on the hard wooden arms, cradling his tea cup in his two hands.

Harry would have been more nervous about the scrutiny, but the sock flavored tea seemed to be doing its' job. His stomach and shoulders slowly unclenched.

"How much of the Headmaster and my conversation did you hear?" Snape asked, at last.

"I didn't..." Harry began, but Snape raised a sceptical eyebrow, "Oh. Erm." Harry felt his cheeks coloring, "Just to the part where you said you didn't want anyone else but the Weasleys to have me." Harry wondered, not for the first time, if Snape read minds.

The professor nodded, "And, so I won't."

Harry stared at the man. Finally blurt out, "Why?"

"Why...what?" Snape returned, slowly.

"Why don't you want to just get rid of me?" Harry asked, confused, "I mean..." he stopped, not sure
what he meant.

Snape looked at him levelly, "I do not believe in passing off duties, once I have accepted them."

That seemed cold, but to Harry, it made sense. Snape was all about duty.

The Professor leaned forward to take the cup that Harry had emptied, "Potter, I have already told you, that I do not intend to take up where your relatives left off. That includes, not abandoning you at first opportunity. Do you understand?" he said, "I will not change our arrangements without at least informing you."

Harry shrugged. Now that he no longer had his tea cup in his hand, he twined his fingers in the blankets.

"I am...that is I wanted to say..." Snape seemed terribly uncomfortable suddenly, his gaze shifting away from Harry's face to somewhere in the corner of the ceiling. His eyes came back to look into Harry's and the wizard made a movement as though squaring his shoulders, "I am sorry."

"Huh?" Harry wasn't sure what the man was apologizing for. He shifted uncomfortably, pulling the blankets tighter around himself.

"I would like to apologize to you for..." Snape began again.

Harry jumped in, before the man could get far, "It's fine. Don't worry." Harry didn't think he could bear to hear whatever Snape had to say. It was embarrassing enough, without the man going all apologetic over poor, pitiful Harry.

Snape stopped, cleared his throat, "Yes, well..." he looked uncertain, for a minute. That was a look Harry had never seen on his face before, "Will you be able to sleep, do you think?"

Harry nodded.

Snape stood up, vanished the tea things, "If you need anything, knock on my door." He said, as he left the room, "Good night."

Harry just stared as the door closed.
The Tribuo Vita charm is generally believed to strengthen or restart the heart of a dying wizard or witch by infusing a measure of the donors' magic into the body of the recipient, before all of the recipient's magic has fled. It is most successful in those cases where the recipient's body has sustained little to no trauma or debility from disease.

Although one may perform the spell, at least two are required to perform the spell with some degree of safety and better for it to be three. The spell itself is dangerous for all but the most powerful of wizards. The addition of a third lends a stability that prevents the overdraining of...

A knock at the door startled Severus out of his book, as he sat drinking tea at his kitchen table. Normally, he sat in the living room to read, but this morning the kitchen had felt much more inviting than usual.

As much as he hated to admit it, Potter's thorough scrubbing had lent the room a coziness that Severus could hardly credit. He wondered idly if he should spell the floor to white, although the soft grey that the floor had cleaned up to gave the kitchen a sort of rustic character that was not unattractive. The only thing that jarred were the yellowing curtains that the boy had been unable to wash. They now soaked in the sink, in one of Severus' best bleaching potions.

This morning, he almost felt that Eileen's ghost might come in at any moment to press a kiss to his forehead and question him animatedly about his studies, or merely go about her business, singing softly while he read at the table.

As he got up to answer the knock, Severus felt for his wand, in the pocket of his dressing gown. It was unlikely to be anyone but Dumbledore, although what he could be doing here, at this time of day, Severus didn't know.

He took a moment to look out of the spy hole in the door. His elderly neighbor from next door stood patiently waiting on the doorstep.

The Cooks had lived next to the Snapes for at least forty years. Mrs. Cook was likely the only Muggle left on the street that remembered either Eileen or Toby. Therefore, she was the only Muggle who remembered the Snape house existed.

The charms Severus used to hide the house from Muggle eyes were complex. A combination of Muggle repelling and Notice-me-not charms that meant new people moving in wouldn't notice the place, and people like Mrs. Cook wouldn't think about either the house or him. Sometimes she'd seen Severus on the street. Naturally, he was polite to her and never did anything to make anyone gossip, so he just slipped out of her mind as a part of the local scenery.

When Mrs. Cook died or moved on, the house would be completely hidden from sight, as there would be no one to remember that it was ever there. Of course, since the boy had spoken to her, she'd remembered the house, because Severus hadn't thought to modify the charms or warn the the child not to speak to her.

No matter, she'd only remember them as her quiet neighbors in a week's time (or whatever it took to renew the wards on Hogwart's).

"I beg your pardon, Severus." said Mrs. Cook, as he opened the door, "I'm sorry to bother you so early, when you're ill."
Point of fact it was gone nine, but Severus was moving slowly this morning.

"No matter," he replied, as graciously as he could manage,

"Harry forgot his coat last night." she said, holding it out.

"Oh. Thank you." Severus reached out to take it. As he did so, he realized that in the soft fabric, he felt a thin, hard cylinder.

A wave of fury washed over him.

Potter had left his wand in the pocket of this coat that he'd so carelessly misplaced. The boy was going to find himself cleaning cauldrons every night for the next four years, at this rate.

"Ah, Severus," the woman was saying, "I wonder, could I have a word with you about Harry?"

Severus sighed, wrenching his mind back from the detentions he was planning to assign the child, "Yes?" he asked.

She looked pointedly past him, and then "Is Harry about?" she asked softly.

Harry would not be waking up until at least noon, given the strength of the calming draught Severus had given him the night before.

"Harry," the name felt strange and yet somehow right in Severus' mouth, "Is still asleep. He had a difficult night last night."

It was most worrisome that in the early morning, when Severus had woken, he had heard the boy muttering and tossing, in the throes of some unpleasant dream or other.

Severus had done the decent thing and shaken the child. Potter had sat bolt upright in bed, and thrown an arm up to protect his face. Severus had been reminded of those bruises he'd seen on the boy's forearms when he had done his screening exam.

"Sorry..." the child had whispered, "I'll do it over again."

"Shh, you're dreaming." Severus had told him.

Potter had blinked owlishly, "Professor?" he slowly dropped his arm.

"Yes. Go back to sleep."

The child had nodded sleepily and snuggled into his blankets. Severus pulled the quilt up over the boy's shoulder as if he had been one of Severus' Slytherin firsties having a bad bout of homesickness.

Severus might have to start giving him a potion specifically for anxiety if he was having nightmares after a calming draught.

"Did he?" Mrs. Cook asked, still standing there, in a tidy green sweater and jeans. She must have been gardening at some point this morning, she hardly ever wore jeans otherwise, Severus mused tiredly.

With an effort, Severus wrenched his groggy thoughts around to the here and now,

Mrs. Cook stood looking at him expectantly.
"Perhaps, you'd like to come in?" Severus asked, realizing that, short of Obliviating the woman, he'd never get rid of her. Unfortunately, the boy was likely to speak with her again, so that wasn't more than a short term solution. This was likely not a good conversation to have on his front doorstep, either.

"Thank you, Severus," she smiled. Severus waved her in. His wards remained quiescent, proving that she was indeed a Muggle, with no magic upon her. Severus still kept her in front of him, just in case.

"Oh, my. You keep everything just like Eileen did, dear." she said, entering the kitchen.

At least in the kitchen he did. He certainly wasn't about to take her into the living room where he kept his potion books.

She sat at the table and he took down another teacup, pouring for her and offering her sugar before sitting himself. He put Potter's coat on the back of his chair.

"I was so surprised when I spoke to him." Mrs. Cook began, "He's so like Lily. Same eyes and the same voice even, although I daresay that will change when he gets older. And you have custody of him, do you?"

Severus nodded.

"Ah." she shifted around, a little uncomfortably, "I know it's terribly personal, Severus, but as one teacher to another," Mrs. Cook had taught in the local primary school for years. Actually, Mrs. Cook had taught Severus when he had attended it. Potter must have explained to her that Severus was his teacher. She continued, "Well, the boy told me he'd been living with Petunia. The way he spoke about her seems...well...it appears to me that you've taken custody of the child because he was mistreated, somehow."

"You're quite right," replied Severus, softly. He looked her in the eye, "It's just come to our attention that Petunia and her husband were," Severus hesitated, then plunged ahead with as much of the truth as he'd dare tell this woman, "Abusing the boy." He sighed heavily, "Sadly, we didn't realize until just this year. I suppose that was partly my fault. I never imagined Petunia..."

Mrs. Cook was nodding, sympathetically, "It's so easy to ascribe their behavior to another cause, isn't it? We had a terrible scandal a few years ago at our school, you know. It was in all the papers. We had a child who was killed by their mother's boyfriend, and no one had ever even suspected..." She shook her head, "Well, some of us suspected, but often the children themselves go to some lengths to hide it."

Severus nodded soberly, for once not rebuffing the sympathy, "Yes, Mr. Potter was quite reticent about the whole matter. If it hadn't been for another case, we would have likely missed his as well. Even now, I fear we know little more than what the physical exam showed."

Her eyebrows rose, "So, there isn't anyone at school he's close to?"

Severus was fairly certain she didn't mean her words as an accusation, but it felt like that nonetheless, "He is quite wary of adults. Although, perhaps last night we had something of a breakthrough."

"That's encouraging to hear. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help." she said gently, "After our incident we had all sorts of special training. I also have the names of some good counselors that aren't far."

Severus suppressed a smirk. Getting Harry admitted to a Muggle psychiatric facility would probably
be counterproductive, in the long run, "Thank you, but no, we've arranged counseling for the boy."

Mrs. Cook looked at Severus speculatively for a moment, before saying, "It's very good of you to take the child in. It can be healing to care for someone else with similar...issues."

Severus did not want to have this conversation.

"I used to spend a lot of time with your mother when you were away at school, you know." she continued inexorably, "She was very proud of you, you know."

"I didn't know that you and she spoke often." Severus said, stiffly.

Mrs. Cook sighed, "I'm afraid we only really became friends after that time when we called the police on Toby."

"I beg your pardon?" exclaimed Severus, stunned.

"She never told you?" the woman sipped at her tea, looking both sad and discomfited, "I'm sorry. I suppose it makes sense that she wouldn't tell you, though. You were away at school; I suppose you must have been about twelve or thirteen. Your father and she were having a bit of a barney. Right out in the street, you see. Now, you know that we wouldn't ever call the police on a neighbor, normally," she sounded rather embarrassed, "But, we were afraid it would turn nasty. My Jack and Dai Evans tried to talk some sense into him, but you know your father. He wouldn't have any of it. He ranted and raved about Eileen and Eileen's family...and you, I'm afraid. Said horrible things. Well, Violet and I, we brought Eileen in here. He'd already given her a black eye. I have an idea that's how they ended up in the street, you know. I suppose the poor girl was trying to get out of his way." She reached over to pour herself some more tea, "We tried to get her to go somewhere, but she said she didn't have anywhere to go."

Severus nodded, "My grandparents disowned her when she married my father. They never considered her marriage legitimate. If she'd have gone back to them, she would have had to leave me with my father." he said, quietly, "The Princes were an old family and they felt she'd married beneath herself."

Mrs. Cook shook her head irritably, "Yes, Eileen said something like that. You'd've thought it was the 19th Century not 1973, the way she spoke."

Severus swallowed, not wanting to ask the question, but since they were talking, "Was this long before..."

"Before Eileen took sick?" Mrs. Cook said, sadly, "No, not long. It was maybe the following spring that she started having such trouble. Well, in those days, we didn't know much about depression, did we? Not as though you could pop a pill. I think maybe the doctor gave her some Valium to help her sleep," she paused and looked down, "But wasn't that...?"

"Yes. It was." Severus gritted, remembering his seventh year. The odd letter his mother had owled him. And then a week later, the horrible conference with Dumbledore, Poppy and Slughorn. A week after that, he'd joined the Dark Lord.

"I'm sorry, Severus, I didn't mean to bring up all this old business." the woman looked was bright red and looking down at her hands, fiddling with her wedding ring.

It was far too early in the morning to start drinking, Severus knew, although that had never stopped Toby. After Eileen's death, Toby had ended up on the dole and had drunk himself to death. After Toby's death, Severus had enhanced his status within the Death Eaters by intimating to the Dark
Lord that the cause of the man's demise had been slow poison at his son's hand. In truth, it had been Toby's guilty conscience and a steady diet of whiskey that had done the man in. Although Severus was guilty of many crimes, murder was not yet among them.

"I fear a lot of old business has been stirred up, lately." Severus said, dryly.

She nodded, was silent for another minute, "Harry seems very self sufficient." she said, probably to change the subject.

Severus nodded, "Yes. I'll admit, my experience in other cases has children such as Mr. Potter notably lacking in life skills." It had never occurred to Severus that Harry was the one doing the housework because most thirteen year old wizards he knew wouldn't have been able to so competently care for a house. Hell, he'd have been impressed that Harry had managed to make his own bed.

The woman nodded again, "Yes. Harry seems of the kind to be overly responsible. And, he's not really accustomed to praise. I suppose you've noticed all of this, though."

Severus had to remind himself that the Muggle woman wasn't trying to twist the knife.

"Does he not have any family on his father's side?" she asked innocently.

Severus shook his head, "No."

"That's a shame." she said, sipping on her tea some more, "As I understand it, Lily made quite a good marriage for herself. Did you know him? What did he do?"

"I knew him." said Severus, striving to keep a neutral tone, "He went to school with Lily and I. Although he didn't need a scholarship. He worked for the government before he was killed. Quite high up."

"Oh, I see." the woman said, almost comprehending, "So he came from money?"

Severus nodded.

She made a little noise in her throat, "Well, that would explain some of the things Petunia said to Angie." She seemed to sense Severus' discomfort and finished her tea rather quickly after that, "Well, Severus, I won't trouble you any more. Please think about bringing Harry and yourself over on Sunday, won't you?"

To his own surprise, Severus found himself nodding, "Yes, if we're still here. Thank you, Mrs. Cook."

She smiled, "I'll see myself out. You look as if you're hardly well enough to be out of bed." she stood and walked down the passage

"Hello, Harry dear." Severus heard her say. The boy replied with an indistinct greeting, "You look a bit peaky. You should go get some breakfast in you. I'll see you later."

If the child had been sitting on the stairs, he would have likely heard most of their conversation. Severus used to listen to his own parents talk in the kitchen from the fourth step down. The fifth one down creaked,. The boy must have sat on the fourth one, in order to remain undetected. Not something he would have done accidentally, Severus was certain. Yet again, Severus would have to readjust his estimation of the boy.
Mrs. Cook closed the door behind her.

"Come in here, Mr. Potter." called Severus, quietly.

Potter came hesitantly into the kitchen, his hands nervously clasped in front of him and his eyes wide behind the lenses of his glasses. He still wore the clothes he had on last night, having slept in them, by the looks of it.

"I swear Severus, if you don't start calling him by his given name..." Lily's voice was in his head again.

Severus purposely looked back down at his book that still lay open on the table, seeing the way the boy was avoiding his gaze, "I made you some breakfast." he said calmly, "It's in the breadbox. Sit down and eat something. Tea's on the table."

"Thank you." the child whispered, moving around the kitchen silently. No wonder the boy was able to sneak around the castle like he did, he didn't make any noise, at all.

Severus used to put that down to a child who was determined to sneak about. Now, he saw it as the mark of a child who feared to draw attention to himself.

"Can't imagine where he gets that from." Lily's voice said.

Shut up, Lily, thought Severus irritably, You're not helping.

Potter retrieved his breakfast and brought it to the table. Severus poured him a cup of tea, barely looking up. Potter muttered another word of thanks.

The child poked at his eggs, pushing his food around on his plate rather than eating it. Severus sighed. Without saying anything, he took a bottle of the appetite stimulating potion out of the pocket of his dressing gown. He put it on the table and slid it across, pushing it with one finger as though it were a chess piece. Keeping his face pointed towards his book, he raised his eyes to look at the child.

Potter's eyes went to it, then darted up to meet Severus', "What's that?" he asked fearfully, as if he hadn't taken this exact potion just days ago.

"Same as before," said Severus, turning the page of his book, "Slow poison, to rid the world of people who annoy their teachers. It takes...oh...maybe a hundred fifty or so years to work, but in the mean time, you'll manage enough OWL's and possibly NEWT's to finish school and then get out of my hair."

A long moment of shocked silence, and then, "Did you just make a joke?"

"The headmaster's visits have that effect on me." Replied Severus, affecting unconcern. Really, the boy was fun to tease. Severus engaged in this kind of banter with some of members of his own house. The ones who required extra attention were usually able to appreciate Severus' humor, eventually.

The boy picked up the bottle and drank it without complaint. After that, his breakfast disappeared rapidly.

Severus surreptitiously observed the boy, rather than read his book. The boy never looked up, eating in silence. There were still dark circles under Potter's eyes and they looked a slight bit puffy. The set of the boy's mouth and chin were firm though, wanting to betray no weakness. They had yet to discuss last night's little episode and Severus had a strong suspicion that Potter expected to be
punished fairly harshly for his outburst.

When Potter was done with his food, he gave his plate one of those longing glances as though hoping it would magically refill itself. Severus had put only a small portion on the plate, not wanting to overwhelm the child's appetite. A certain witch he used to know had tended to lose her appetite completely, if she was stressed and faced with too much food. However, the boy didn't ask for more. A symptom of someone who was accustomed to only eating what they were given.

The child was headed to the sink with his plate when Severus said, glancing up from his book "There's more fried eggs in the cupboard, if you like. I put the rest of the pan in there. And some more bacon and toast. The stasis charm will have kept it edible."

Potter stopped halfway to the sink. He seemed to consider Severus, then came to a decision, going to the cupboard and helping himself to more food.

Severus turned his attention back to his book.

...prevents the over-draining of the casters' magic.

Some older authorities regard Tribuo Vita as a type of dark magic, no matter the purpose it is turned to, as it bears a striking resemblance to both Horcruxes and to the Dementor's kiss, insofar as the donors are concerned. In the former, a piece of soul is broken off and secreted in an object, in the latter, the soul is sucked out and presumably destroyed.

Like the Horcrux, during the incantation, a soul fragment is extracted from each donor. Rather than being hidden away, however, this fragment of soul is destroyed (although some more fanciful explanations have the three donor's offering a third of their souls to Death itself in exchange for the soul of the dying), resulting in a massive release of magical energy. This magical energy is directed by the incantor to restart and sustain the heart of the dying.

Because the soul fragment is destroyed, rather than merely disconnected from the main soul, the soul regenerates. It is a slow process that has numerous effects upon the donors.

A long list of side effects Severus could expect followed: weakness, emotional lability, drowsiness, nightmares and brain fog chief amongst them. Lovely. Well, that would explain the past two days.

Tribuo Vita creates a bond deeper than a life debt. In some circles, it is accepted as being as binding as blood. Again, we see the similarity to certain Dark Rituals, although Healing Oaths...

Wonderful. Severus was now an honorary Weasley. Minerva already was a distant Weasly cousin and Poppy had taken all of the Healer Oaths which negated life debts. Chances were, they nullified this as well.

Still too early for drinking, unfortunately. And more than likely contraindicated. The one glass he'd had last night had left him with a headache this morning.

On the other hand, the Weasleys were an ancient family. Adoption into their clan had benefits. Especially should Severus ever find himself on the wrong side of the Wizengamot again. He would not have to rely solely on Dumbledore's good will. Yes, that was something to consider, for the future.

The clattering of dishes in the sink pulled Severus from his reverie. Potter had rinsed out the now white curtains, wrung them out and was filling the sink with soapy water.

"Leave it, Potter." Severus said idly, looking up, "I'll do the washing up."
Another one of those comical looks of surprise, "Oh." the boy seemed confused, not sure what to do next. He glanced at the curtains that were dripping onto the floor.

Severus flicked his wand, muttering a quick drying charm and then had them rehung in about thirty seconds. Really, he should have done that a while ago, the white curtains really brightened the room. Unsettlingly, even that little bit of magic left Severus feeling as tired as if he'd done it by hand.

"Put the kettle on and come sit down," Severus told the astonished boy.

Potter did as he was told. He stared at Severus with equal parts fear and defiance. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair, as though to be out of arm's reach of the man.

Severus pretended to take no notice, "I had meant to speak to you about this the first night we were here. Sadly, I underestimated how badly drained I am," he said, putting a book mark into his book and closing it, "As it is, I'm still not quite feeling like myself."

Potter gave a jerky nod.

"So, I thought it would be best if I laid down some house rules," Severus paused, pulled Potter's wand out of the jacket hanging on the back of the chair, and then continued darkly, "First and foremost, you are to remember that you have a dangerous dark wizard after your blood. Leaving your wand in the pocket of your misplaced jacket is asking for death."

Potter's eyes went wide, "Where did you get that?" he demanded, angrily.

"I believe I just told you," Severus said, coldly.

Potter opened his mouth and then closed it again, "I forgot I had it in my jacket." he muttered sullenly.

"I would suggest you do not forget again," Severus said, sternly, suppressing the urge to shout. He was too tired for it and it wouldn't help their current situation.

He held it out for the boy, who took it, looking sheepish.

"Now, while I appreciate your diligence, I would prefer you not spend your days keeping house."

"So you want me to stay in my room?" asked Potter, rather petulantly.

Severus rolled his eyes, "Well, tell me, what do you generally do while you're away from school?"

Anger sparked in the boy's eyes, "What? At the Dursley's?" the child's voice took on an iciness Severus had never heard, "Housework when Aunt Petunia needed help." he said in monotone, his green eyes flat, "The rest of the time I spent pretending I don't exist. That's pretty much it."

"Pretending you don't exist?" asked Severus slowly, "What does that mean?" he had an idea, but he thought it would be a good thing if he got Potter to say it out loud.

"Well," Severus could hear the boy fighting to sound matter of fact, "If anyone came over, they sent me to my room. I had to be quiet so no one would know I was there. Well, unless they needed me to serve things. Last summer they locked me in my room after Dobby the house elf dropped a cake on one of Uncle Vernon's clients." Potter rubbed his nose, "Why'd you think a house elf would be here, anyway?"
"They've done it before," replied Severus, but then pulled the conversation back to the point. Now that Potter was finally being a little forthcoming, Severus was going to take advantage, "That would be when they put bars up on the windows?" he asked.

Potter shrugged, "Yeah."

The kettle started to whistle. Severus summoned it to him and poured the hot water into the teapot, pondering what the boy was telling him, "And, fed you a tin of soup a day?" Severus asked the boy quietly.

Potter's cheeks burned and he ducked his head, "The Weasleys told you that?"

"Yes, they did. Locking a child into a bedroom is not normal behavior, either. How else were you to 'pretend you didn't exist'? It appears to be a skill they taught you early on."

The boy shrugged. That gesture seemed to be a large part of his vocabulary. He seemed to be waiting for Severus to move on, as if they were in class. He seemed to think, that any minute now, Granger would jump in with an acceptable answer.

The silence lengthened, with the boy fidgeting. It became so uncomfortable that the boy finally blurted, "Mostly they locked me in my cupboard when they were tired of looking at me."

"Your cupboard?" asked Severus slowly, that phrase came up so often.

Potter stood suddenly, as if finding being still too hard to bear, "My cupboard! Don't pretend you never knew!" he cried, visciously, "My letter was addressed to 'The cupboard under the stairs'. Obviously everyone thought that was okay."

"Those letters are addressed automatically, Potter. We only knew that they kept being generated, meaning they weren't being received." Severus said woodenly. He didn't turn a hair, but his insides squirmed. Some of the ways Potter was reacting were beginning to make huge amounts of sense, "How often were you locked in the cupboard?"

"How often?" The boy laughed, that same high pitched, eerie laugh Severus had heard last night, "Professor, until I was eleven, that was where I lived. If I wasn't looking after the house or at school, I was in the cupboard."

Severus swallowed, this was more than he was expecting to hear. He'd assumed this business about a cupboard was more in line with Tobias locking Severus in the cellar, "Didn't anyone ever...?"

"The nurse and some social worker came by once," Potter turned to look out of the kitchen window, "I suppose Uncle Vernon must have told them that Dudley's second bedroom was mine and that I was the one who was so careless with my toys." Potter snorted. Apparently the injustice of that rankled, "I got the hiding of my life for being noticed by the nurse."

"Being noticed?" asked Severus slowly.

"Well, you don't bloody well think I went and talked to her myself, do you?" the boy exclaimed.

"Language, Potter." Severus said, but without heat, "No, I can see that you probably went to some lengths to hide this abuse from outside eyes."

"I wasn't abused" Potter said, in a low voice.

"What else would you call it?" snapped Severus, then he sighed, "It's important to name the thing for
what it is." he said, trying to speak reasonably.

"The Dursley's are right arses, but Vernon never got the police called on him by the neighbors, for hitting Aunt Petunia in the middle of the street." The boy said harshly, turning to face Severus with bright, angry eyes.

Severus clenched his fist

"Severus!" Lilly's voice said, sharply. Severus silently named the fourteen uses for unicorn tears, calming himself.

Potter stood with his chin raised and his feet planted. Determined that he wouldn't show weakness to his professor.

All at once, Severus felt himself sag, but he caught something Potter said, "Did Uncle Vernon make a habit of hitting your Aunt Petunia behind closed doors?"

"No!" exclaimed Potter.

"So, he only tended to hit you." Severus said dryly, He leaned his head against the wall, keeping his eyes on the boy, "But, that is besides the point. We were speaking of house rules." Severus was far too tired to really go into depth at the boy's treatment at the hands of his relatives, and he suspected that the boy was too fragile, right now.

"So, I'll stay out of your way." Potter leaned against the sink, his hands in his pockets, "What else do you want me to do?" his tone was a little aggressive.

"Do you have your homework done?" asked Severus.

Potter gave another one of those jerky nods.

"In the cabinet in the living room, there's a television, if you like that. I don't tend to, since they took Dr. Who off the air." Severus said, airily (well, as airily as Severus ever got), "There's also a stereo, but if you scratch my records, you will not like what happens to you afterwards. You may leave the house, as long as you stay within the wards, but do not go behind closed doors with anyone. I expect you to pick up after yourself and do the washing up after I've cooked for us. I generally wear Muggle clothes while I'm here and drop clothes off to the laundrette. If I need any wizarding robes cleaned I take them up to Diagon Alley, when I go."

The boy nodded, his mouth was hanging open.

"Now, regarding your behavior last night." Severus began, his voice a little more stern.

The trembling started again. Severus might not have seen it if he hadn't been looking for it, The child shut his mouth with a snap.

"Sit down, please." For some reason the child just reacted to that tone and those words. Severus felt like he was trying to talk down a frightened hippogriff-finding just the right combination of courtesy and care.

The child sat, "I didn't mean to shout at Professor Dumbledore." he muttered, shamefaced.

"I imagine." replied Severus dryly, "I think, perhaps, you owe the headmaster an apology. So, write a note this morning. Bring it to me at lunchtime and we'll send it along."
Potter stared, "Er...is that all?" he said, after a moment of seeming to wait for Severus to say more.

"No, but given that the floor would get holes in it, were you to scrub it any more, that would be sufficient."

The fact was, Severus needed some time to process this conversation. Probably, he did need to have one of Poppy's mindhealers look at Potter.
The End of His Rope

Chapter Summary

This is a potentially triggering chapter. Deals with suicide and is a little graphic.

This was the stupidest thing Snape had ever come up with. Harry had no idea what to say to Dumbledore and he was heartily embarrassed. Being made to apologize on paper just felt beyond awkward. He wasn't even sure what Snape wanted him to apologize for.

After a dozen false starts, Harry decided that it didn't need to be a saga, and he'd just stick to the basics. That one sentence had taken him over an hour to write.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I am very sorry that my magic got away from me last night and that I shouted at you.

Harry

Of course, it made him sound about five years old.

Every time Harry set quill to parchment, he heard Mrs. Weasley railing at Dumbledore, about how it had been him that sent him to the Dursley's. His skin crawled when he thought of the Minister jovially telling Vernon, the night he'd blown up Marge, that, "It's not unusual for this sort of thing to happen. He doesn't know his own strength. The boy just needs a firm hand. A little discipline usually sorts it out."

Marge had certainly let Vernon know that all Harry needed was a good hiding. She'd also reminded Vernon that it still wasn't against the law to smack your own child (or the one you were guardian of), no matter what any of those namby-pamby, anti-corporal punishment, liberal sorts had to say.

For all that Snape was much scarier than Uncle Vernon, he seemed to be one of those namby pamby, liberal sorts. That thought made Harry snort.

It was so weird the way Snape kept saying that Harry had been abused. Harry wished he'd stop saying that. It was a horrible word that made Harry feel somehow dirty. The only thing the Dursleys ever did that seemed outside the norm to Harry was the cupboard. That was only because they didn't know how to cope with Harry's accidental magic, when he was younger.

A little voice in the back of his head mentioned that he'd never heard of anyone else going for days without food.

There had been two kids at Harry's primary school who'd been taken away from their parents. It was whispered that they'd been abused. When Petunia had heard about these children, she told Dudley not to go near those "little hooligans"; that they were sure to be dangerous, "Coming from a family like that."

She'd remarked darkly to Vernon that evening, that she'd known those kind of families where she grew up, "Surprising to find them in such a good neighborhood." she'd said.
Harry had never thought them dangerous. In fact he'd almost made friends with one, before Dudley had threatened the other boy with a thrashing if he didn't stop being nice to Harry.

From what Mrs. Cook had been saying, Snape came from one of those families.

Shaking his head, he stuck the bit of parchment into an envelope. He didn't seal it, because he assumed Snape wanted to look at it.

A noise from downstairs made him jump. He was so deeply in thought, it took him a second to realize that it was the phone ringing.

He crept to the top of the stairs, sat on the second step down. One of the steps further down creaked and he wasn't sure which one. He could hear just fine from here, though.

"Yes, we're fine." Snape was speaking with some irritation, but he seemed to be attempting to rein it in, "No. Thank you." Snape paused, "That's very kind." pause, "Yes, I do...Of course." another pause, "Yes, he is." Snape said, then shouted "Potter!"

Harry started again, he hadn't thought Snape would know he was up here. He jumped to his feet, "Yes, sir?" he tried to sound innocent, as if he hadn't been eavesdropping for the second time that morning.

"Potter, get down here!"

He jumped up and ran down the stairs. Snape sounded really hacked off.

Snape stood with the phone in hand. He held it out to Harry, "Talk to Granger and assure her that I have not buried you in the back garden." he growled.

Harry realized he'd promised to call the Grangers, "Oh, er, okay." He put the phone up to his ear and Snape swept out of the room, looking ominous even in his dressing gown.

"Hello?" Harry said into the phone.

"Harry?" Hermione said breathlessly, her voice higher pitched than usual, "Are you all right? I don't have an owl, and I was so worried. Then Mum told me she had Professor Snape's phone number. She thought it would be all right if we called. I'm not getting you into trouble, am I?"

"No, it's fine." Harry twisted his hands in the phone cord, listening to the Professor's footsteps as he climbed the stairs, "What do you want?" he asked, wincing at how cold he sounded to his own ears, "I mean..." he trailed off. He never used the phone much at the Dursley's, except to take messages.

"I wanted to see how you were." Hermione replied in a small voice, sounding near tears.

Harry cleared his throat in an attempt to sound more normal, "I think I'm okay." he said softly. He remembered that the last time he'd seen Hermione, he'd collapsed into a pathetic heap on the ground. She must think he was mental, "Have you heard from Ron?" he asked, casting about for something to say.

"Yes. He sent me an owl." She said, sounding a little braver, "He says that Ginny is supposed to be well enough to be moved at the weekend."

"That-that's good." Harry said hesitantly. He did not want to talk about Ginny.

Unfortunately Hermione did, "He said that she's breathing on her own, but she still can't speak. We
still don't know what happened. Everyone's saying it was an accident, but remember what she said just before she collapsed? She wondered if she brewed it right. Ron reckons that proves it was accidental, but she didn't want anyone to get Madame Pomfrey."

Hermione took a breath. Harry reckoned she'd been wanting to talk about this for days, "I don't know...Mum says that it's not uncommon after someone's died for a teenager to do something stupid. I didn't tell her about Ginny and the diary stuff last year. And I certainly didn't tell her about getting petrified." her voice dropped, as though she were afraid of being overheard, "I told her I was in the infirmary with a bad flu, last year. I was afraid she wouldn't let me go back to school."

"Uh-huh." said Harry, when she seemed to be pausing to make sure he was still there. He felt speared through with guilt. He'd been so wrapped up in his own troubles that he hadn't thought once of Ginny since he'd been here. He pulled one of the kitchen chairs over to him so he could sit down.

"She reckons I need to see someone, only she knows I can't see a Muggle. I'd end up locked up." Hermione almost laughed, "She's written to Professor Dumbledore to find one."

"See someone?" asked Harry, confused.

"Yes, like a wizard psychologist or something." Hermione said, far too lightly for Harry's taste.

"Why...why would she want you to see someone like that?" Harry asked cautiously. Perhaps Hermione had been losing it. Maybe that potionGinny had puked all over her had made her a bit mad? Harry didn't think he knew anyone who'd needed to see a psychologist. Harry had heard Petunia talk in hushed tones on the phone, from time to time, about a neighbor who needed to see a psychologist, because she'd "gone 'round the bend".

"Oh, you know." Harry heard his friend sigh, "She says that it's a good idea after something traumatic's happened." She made it sound like her mum thought it was normal.

"Oh." On the other hand, the only Muggles he knew well were the Dursleys. Maybe their opinions of psychologists (and the sort of people who saw them) were as reliable as their opinions on wizards.

"So, are you all right?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah. Fine." Harry lied, not knowing what else to say.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice was tentative, as though she wasn't sure how Harry was going to take what she had to say next, "Ron told me...he said that Snuffles...died...saving everyone in the Tower from Sirius Black."

Harry really didn't want to talk about Snuffles, "Listen," Harry said, hurriedly, "I don't think Snape wants me talking on the phone. I've got Hedwig, I can just send you a letter, okay?" His voice was thick. It would be easier to talk to Hermione through letters; she wouldn't hear how pathetic he was.

"Oh...all right." Harry knew by the tone of her voice, that she'd be biting her lip.

Harry heard a woman's voice in the background.

"Mum says to have Professor Snape bring you with him, when he comes round her office." Hermione said, her voice bright and forced.

"Oh, erm, okay then." Harry hesitated, "Listen, I have to go. I'll send Hedwig, okay?" He hung up the phone without waiting for her to say goodbye.
His breath caught in his chest. He closed his eyes, resting his fisted hands on his thighs and focused on the feel of his fingernails biting into the palms of his clenched fists. It hurt, but it felt real, in a way that nothing else felt real. Harry felt as though he wasn't even really in his body; if he tried, he could pop right out of the top of his head.

Harry thought of Ginny's face as he'd last seen it, slack and still, her eyes the only thing that seemed alive; Mrs Weasely brushing her hair.

A wave of anger flowed over him. Remembering what Ginny had said to them, Harry couldn't help but think she'd meant to kill herself. How could Ginny have done that? She had everything she could want. Everything Harry had ever wanted.

It seemed Ginny had been more affected by Riddle than any of them had imagined, though. Could it be that he was still working some kind of dark enchantment on her?

Maybe people touched by that kind of darkness couldn't ever get rid of it. Unconsciously, Harry lifted his hand to his forehead.

"Potter?" Snape's smooth voice was dark with concern, startling Harry out of his thoughts.

"What?" Harry's eyes snapped open.

The professor stood in the doorway of the kitchen, leaning on his stick, staring at Harry, "Are you all right?" He'd changed into his Muggle trousers and sweater. He still looked a bit rough, but he'd managed to shave and damp hair hung around his face in tendrils.

"Yeah. I mean...Yes, sir." Harry nodded, trying to sound sure of himself.

Snape looked at him with narrowed eyes, "Hmm." he said, "Did you bring your note?"

"Oh...erm...left it upstairs."

"Go get it then. I have some other letters to send." said Snape.

Harry pounded up the stairs and came back down with it.

The older wizard slowly made his way to the kitchen window. One of the brown school owls was sitting just outside, apparently just waiting to be needed. Snape tied three or four letters to its leg. Harry handed over his letter. Snape took it, pausing a moment to absent-mindedly seal the envelope, without reading it.

"I was planning on sandwiches for lunch." Snape said, when he'd finished, "Unless there's something you'd prefer?" the man sounded as though he were going out of his way to be nice.

Harry shrugged.

Snape made one of those irritable noises in his throat, "Get the bread out, then, Potter."

The rest of the day was quiet. After lunch, Snape went into the the living room, settling down with a stack of books. Bereft of housework to keep him busy, Harry wasn't sure what to do with himself, after the lunch dishes were done. He tentatively joined the professor in the living room, expecting to be told to get out of Snape's sight, but Snape didn't seem object to Harry's presence at all.

Harry sat down on the floor in front of the fire with his back leaning against the settee.

After a while, Snape pulled out his wand. With a few flicks, he set a record on the old fashioned
stereo that was housed in a wooden cabinet. Harry hadn't realized there was actually a stereo there and he'd been afraid to open the door, in case something nasty and magical had burst out of it.

It was strange how unmagical Snape's house seemed to be.

The next bit of strangeness was the music Snape listened to. Harry was convinced that Snape would listen to classical music, or else something from the Wizarding World that Harry had never heard before, so he was surprised when the first record Snape put on was anything but; rather it was a some variety of dark, moody rock music.

Harry had no idea what it was, since the Dursleys wouldn't let Harry even listen to the radio, if they were around. It wasn't like what Dudley liked, though. It was what some Muggle teenagers down the street from the Dursley's liked to listen to. The teenagers that used to make Petunia go mad over their purple or pink hair, boys with black made up eyes and girls with nose rings.

By the middle of the afternoon, Harry finished the book he'd started the night he'd gotten to Snape's house, and he was beginning to feel edgy with inactivity. More, there were things in his mind that just wouldn't go away. He had questions he just had to ask, never mind if it sent Snape into a temper. So far, Snape's temper hadn't been any worse than it ever had been, so maybe that had Harry feeling braver.

On the other hand, maybe he was just losing his mind, "Sir?" he asked tentatively.

"Yes, Potter?" asked Snape, without looking up from his book.

Harry took a deep breath, blurt out the question that had been bothering him for the last day and a half, "Were you and my mother...Did you and she...?" his courage failed him as the potion's master looked at him sharply.

"Did we what?" the man asked, his jaw tight and his lips compressed to colorless lines.

"Did my father take my mother away from you?" Harry never did know when to keep his mouth shut.

Snape's eyebrows furrowed, then his face cleared, "No, Potter, I never competed with James Potter for your mother's affections."

"But Mrs. Cook said you were inseparable." Harry persisted, convinced that this would be the reason Snape hated Harry's father, and by extension Harry himself.

Snape closed his book, "You, Weasley and Granger are fairly inseparable. Which of them is your intended?" Snape's mouth quirked up at the corner.

"I...Hermione and me...we're just friends..." Harry found himself babbling. It was far too disturbing to think of Hermione as a girlfriend.

Snape nodded, gravely, "As were your mother and I." The man sighed, "She was a very good friend."

Harry pushed his hair out of his eyes, "I don't know much about her." he admitted, quietly.

"Did Petunia never speak of her?" asked Snape.

Harry shook his head, "She said once to Aunt Marge that she thought my parents had to get married. That their wedding was rushed, because my mum was...you know."
Snape seemed to smirk, "I promise you, Potter, James Potter did not marry your mother because she was pregnant." The expression was gone after an instant and the man's face settled into dour lines, "If the wedding was rushed, it was due to the fact that the Wizarding World was engaged in a war. People tend to do these things more quickly under those circumstances."

"Oh." said Harry, "But, if you were friends..." Snape sat, looking at him coldly, and Harry's courage failed him, "Never mind." he said hastily.

"No, Potter, go on." Said Snape. His tone was soft, not encouraging, but not discouraging either.

"Forget it." Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

Snape tutted but seemed willing to drop the subject.

The day continued in this vein. Harry wrote notes to Hermione and Ron, but he really didn't say much.

Hedwig returned with replies in what seemed a very short time.

Ron's letter told him that Ginny continued to get better. There was a surprising thread of anger in the tone of Ron's update. Ron said that Ginny's potion overdose was an accident, apparently she'd botched the brewing of a Draught of Peace. However, he still was angry at her for taking stupid risks.

Like he was one to talk.

Hermione on the other hand, was convinced that Ginny had done it on purpose. She was more forthcoming in writing than she would have been in person, Harry thought. She sent him a long letter that she must have been working on, even before she spoke to him on the phone, talking about the whole term.

Among other things, Hermione told him that she had gone to Lupin in the first place because Ginny had told her and her brothers "They better do something about Harry before he ends up like Neville."

Apparently, Ginny had been adamant that Harry's behavior was just like Neville's. She'd also made some very dark implications about what happens to people who aren't looked after by their friends, that she wouldn't explain.

So really, Ginny was to blame for Harry's current predicament. To an extent, that made Harry feel better about Ron and Hermione. If Ginny had been winding Hermione and the other Weasleys up, being all guilty about Neville, then it was no wonder they'd gone to Lupin.

Two days passed, and Snape seemed to be getting better, spending more time awake. He still had the thing where he'd randomly drop off, but Harry never made the mistake of trying to shake him awake again.

Harry avoided talking to him, as much as he could, limiting his answers to "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" if at all possible. For some reason, he kept thinking about how Snape knew so much more about his mother than he, Harry, did. It wasn't fair. It was yet another person who knew far more about Harry's life than Harry did.

Snape made the next few meals. Harry was actually surprised that the man wasn't a bad cook. He also apparently liked Muggle food. The next evening he sent Harry out for Indian take away. When Harry admitted he'd never had Indian, the man had merely told him to order himself a mild chicken curry, rather than sneering at him.
Harry had never had so little to do in his life.

Snape didn't even seem to care if he slept till all hours. Which was good, because Harry couldn't sleep more than two hours at a time, without waking up in a cold sweat.

This time, the nightmare sent him rushing to the loo to be sick.

He must have made too much noise, because he immediately heard Snape come out of his bedroom.

"What's the matter, Potter?" sighed the man.

"Nothing. I'm fine." Harry muttered, standing up shakily. He felt terribly self conscious as he washed his hands and face and rinsed out his mouth.

"Curry not agreeing with you?" Snape sounded almost solicitous.

Harry nodded, looking for an easy out. "It's fine." He said, softly, "No big deal."

Snape hesitated, "You know, Potter, it sometimes does one good to talk about...things."

Harry had to hand it to the man, he was a damned fine actor. That smooth voice was heavy with sympathy and had taken a coaxing tone, as if Harry were a kitten he was trying to talk out from under a car. Harry could almost believe he gave a damn. But it was his Duty, wasn't it? To make sure Harry was okay?

Harry almost laughed out loud, "No. it's fine." he wasn't a bad actor himself, "I just think it's that I never had curry before."

Snape narrowed his eyes, but nodded, "Your mother had a touchy stomach, as well."

Snidely, Harry thought Snape ought to know, given that he and his mother were inseparable. Of course, Harry didn't know the first thing about his mother, did he?

Harry nodded again. He really just wanted to head back to his room.

Snape turned away, "Good night, then Potter, if you don't need anything."

Harry mumbled, "Good night, sir."

He lay back down in bed, but he knew he'd never be able to go back to sleep. This last nightmare had been of Ginny, laying in the Chamber of Secrets, Tom Riddle bending over her form as Hermione tried desperately to get Ginny to breathe again.

Harry wondered how the potion Ginny had used felt. He'd never made a Draught of Peace himself, but it was good for just generally calming. Ginny must have drunk an awful lot to overdose on it. She must have brewed it wrong, then. If it was easy to overdose on, it wouldn't be in a student book. Or at least not outside of the Restricted Section.

He turned over again, restlessly, wondering how it must feel to die. Potions were all very well, but they were too easy to mess up.

Shock at his own train of thought made him pause. It had been at the back of his mind for weeks, but it now was surging forth in an awful black wave. It would be horrible for something to happen to Ginny. She had a huge family who loved her very much. The vision of Mrs Weasley brushing Ginny's hair made Harry's throat ache.
Harry on the other hand...

Well, who did Harry have? Dumbledore had sent him to live with the Dursleys. And then he had sent him back, again and again. Ron and Hermione? They had gone behind his back to the teachers, not even telling him. Anyway, they'd be fine without him, they had their own families. Mrs. Weasley would be upset, but she had Ginny to look after.

Snape? Snape would just be relieved not to have to cope with Harry underfoot.

Really, the only one who'd miss him would be Hedwig, now that Snuffles had gone. Harry sat up, feeling oddly liberated. Very quietly, he crossed over to the desk, picking up quill and parchment.

Dear Professor Snape,

Would you please look after Hedwig? She seems to like you and I know she really appreciates that you let her out at night to hunt. If it's a problem, please see that she gets to Hagrid's.

HP

So, how would one not mess this up?

Harry's thoughts went back to the Astronomy Tower. That was too far away now, and who knew when they were getting back to Hogwarts. He didn't like to leave a mess, so cutting his wrists was probably out.


He looked around his room. His trunk sat open with some of his school clothes inside. His eyes fell on the ties. They wouldn't work, but perhaps he had something that would? He dug around the trunk, until he came up with one of his long winter scarves.

The closet had a bar to hang clothes on, that looked very sturdy. Sturdy enough to hold up one scrawny little freak.

He looked at the scarf. He'd heard someone say that hanging was a pretty painless way to die.

He began to twist the scarf around and around, to make it more of a narrow rope. He tied a slip knot, wishing he knew how to do better knots, but this one would serve. As a last precaution, he closed the window, so Hedwig couldn't get in while he was doing this and make a noise that would wake up Snape.

The bar was set at about five foot high. Harry was four foot, eight inches, could he hang himself with four inches of space? He dragged the chair over to the closet. If he tied the noose tight enough, he could just slip off the chair.

He tied the scarf to the bar and stood on the chair, to put his head through the noose.

Feeling like he had when he stood at the top of the Astronomy Tower, he gave the chair a kick away from him.

The noose pulled tight and hard against his throat.

Harry tried to gasp, but there was only the smallest wheeze of air getting past the constriction. His head felt light and like it was going to explode at the same time. His eyes felt as though they were starting from their sockets.
Oh Merlin, it hurt. Why didn't he think it would hurt? The scarf was cutting into his throat. Why did it hurt so much? He scrambled at his throat frantically, with his fingernails, trying to loosen the horrible tightness. What was he thinking? He couldn't open his eyes or pull his head into a more natural position. He kicked out, trying to find a purchase on the floor or wall. His body wanted to breathe so badly and his head felt as though it was twisting of his neck.

His ears were ringing like a fire alarm and a great roaring black wave was coming to claim him.

"Harry!" A distant voice cried.

Miraculously, Harry felt his body lifted in someone's arms, taking the weight from the noose. The scarf vanished.

Harry gasped and coughed, weakly.

"Oh, thank god." that same voice whispered, as whoever-it-was touched the side of his throat.

Harry opened his eyes slightly. His glasses were gone, but he saw the unmistakable outline of Snape.

"Harry? Can you hear me?" Snape demanded.

"Yessir." Harry croaked.

"Come on, let's get you off the floor." Snape's voice was terribly soft, with some sort of tremor in it. He lifted Harry again and put him on the bed, pulling up the bed covers.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut. He had not planned on this, not at all. He tried to turn over, to burrow into a blanket cocoon, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him, "Keep still, a moment, Harry." Snape said.

He was dimly aware that Snape was using his wand on him. Not being allowed to turn away, Harry kept his eyes screwed shut. He wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor. Now he really wanted to die.

Snape must summoned something, because Harry heard a bottle uncorked, "I need you to take this, Harry." whispered Snape.

Harry shook his head, slightly. He didn't want anything from Snape.

The potions master sighed, "It's a potion for dreamless sleep. We can talk about this in the morning."

Unless it was one of Snape's better poisons, Harry didn't want it, he opened his eyes to glare at Snape, "Don't want it."

The professor was sitting on the edge of Harry's bed, dressed in a blue nightshirt. Apparently he'd been sound asleep when he'd heard Harry. Snape's expression was shadowed, yet somehow more open than Harry had ever seen it before, "That was not a request, Harry." The soft voice was firm.

Harry shook his head again.

Snape sighed, sounding exhausted. He pointed his wand at the potion and muttered an incantation.

From the momentary coolness in Harry's stomach, he realized Snape had spelled the potion into him.

"You bastard." he spat.
"Yes, well, you'll be alive to discuss my parentage in the morning." Snape said, recovering some of his snark.

Harry's eyes fell closed.
Mortal Peril

Chapter Summary

In which Severus summons some help.

Severus flipped on the electric light to better examine what the child had done to himself.

The boy hadn't complained of any pain before Severus had spelled that potion into him, but doubtless that was because with the shock and near asphyxiation he wouldn't have felt it if yet. The croaky, weak voice and almost spastic movements of his neck spoke of real damage. The hastily cast assessment spell backed it up.

He had almost barked at the child when he was trying to shake his head. That would have only caused further trauma (mental or physical, it didn't matter at this point).

Under the bright electric light, Severus could see darkening bruises all around Harry's neck. Why the child had decided to do himself injury tonight...

Well, they'd get to the bottom of the emotions tomorrow. Tonight Severus would work on the injuries he could see.

Just to be safe, Severus cast a full body bind on the sleeping boy, taking care that his neck was properly aligned. Next, a spell to monitor Harry's breathing, in case his airway started to swell or fluid got into it when he couldn't move. A few more spells gave the child extra oxygen, a blue magical glow appearing over his nose and mouth to signify the presence of pure oxygen. Severus summoned a recording parchment to keep track of what the monitoring spells were saying. For now, according to them, Harry was physically stable.

The diagnostic spells showed the kind of damage one would expect from a botched hanging. Harry had fractured his larynx and one of his cervical vertabrae. No nerve damage...the boy's astonishing luck still held; that could have been a very nasty repair. There didn't seem to be any brain damage, either. Magic protected the child, of course, but it could only go so far. The boy's magic, might have rallied to sever the scarf or levitate the boy or it might not have. Self inflicted injuries often had the effect of confusing a wizard's magic.

Severus looked at the sleeping child, thinking hard. Making his mind up, he summoned his Patronus. It was bright with the relief that the child lived.

Sev, admit it, you are ecstatic that Harry's alive, Lily's annoyingly accurate voice in his head, said

He gave it it's instructions before he summoned his dressing gown. It was chilly and it was going to be a long night.

The boy's injuries were not life threatening, but healing them would be a delicate job, beyond Severus' skill. If he did a poor repair, it would just have to be redone, and the child was traumatized enough, as it was.

He summoned a tea pot, and the makings of a nice cup from the kitchen. He didn't dare leave the child even for a second, not even with a sleeping potion and a full body bind on him. The truth was,
Severus didn't like to give him that much sleeping potion, until his injuries were fully healed.

Severus sighed, "What am I going to do with you?" he asked rhetorically, in a soft voice.

He made his tea and pulled up a chair, next to the bed, so he could keep an eye on Harry's face.

In repose, the boy's face was again very like his grandfather Evans, Severus thought. It was the boy's defiant or petulant expressions that looked so like James Potter.

Severus drank his tea, considering the black haired child. He had known that it was possible that the boy was capable of something like this, but he had expected, perhaps, a little more warning.

Severus spared a moment to thank all the gods he'd ever heard of that Molly Weasley had the foresight to tell him about the alarm clock spell. He might never have found Harry until it was too late, otherwise.

The alarm had started whooping as the hand had ticked over to "Mortal Peril". Waking from a sound sleep, it had taken him precious seconds to work out what the alarm was, and then a few more precious seconds to ascertain the child's location. Thank Merlin that it hadn't been the cellar. His anti-apparition wards would have had to have been rebuilt from the ground up after he broke them.

He wondered what had made Harry decide to do it tonight. The child had been quiet all day, but no more so than usual. They had not even had words. The phone call from Granger? Had she upset him?

There was no telling.

His mother had been the same. He would never know what caused her to kill herself that chill spring day. She had chosen a potion much more swift and sure than the Endless Peace Miss Weasley had brewed. There would have been no saving her, even if she had been discovered fifteen seconds after ingesting it.

Severus heart felt heavy in his chest. It seemed that Harry had inherited the Snape tendency toward depression. Given the burdens the child struggled under, however, it was surprising that this hadn't happened sooner.

The child made a low noise in his chest, seeming to try to cast off the jinx holding him immobile.

"Shh." Severus put his tea on the bedside table and took one of the boy's hands between his own, not wanting Harry to wake up properly and panic. That wasn't at all what either of them needed, "Keep still, Harry. You've hurt yourself. Madam Pomfrey will be along soon."

Heavy eyes opened to slits. The boy was fighting the potion, as well as the spell.

"Go back to sleep," Severus said, not sure if Harry heard him or knew who was speaking.

The hand in Severus' twitched. Severus looked at the child's face. His eyebrows were furrowed and the mouth was turned down in a frightened line.

Harry's groggy, barely audible voice came out with a frightened, "Lemmego. M'sorry. Pl'slemmego. Msorry.""

Ah.

Severus whispered an incantation to modify the spell, to allow the child to move his arms.
That seemed to help. Harry's hand tightened on Severus', drawing it to him so that he could press the back of it to his cheek.

Clearly, the child had no idea who was sitting with him, Severus thought wryly, but the eyes closed fully and his breathing evened out.

Severus found himself thinking of the times his mother had cared for him, in this very same room. The empty place in his soul seemed to ache less, at the moment, with the small hand curled in his own.

For no earthly reason, other than to keep himself awake, Severus started to speak to the child. His mother liked to tell him fairy stories when he was ill. His mother's favorite was The Fountain of Fair Fortune, so he started with that one.

Poppy was accustomed to middle of the night summons. It was an occupational hazard.

What she was not accustomed to was that summons taking the form of a Patronus; a bright silver yearling stag, who spoke with Severus Snape's voice, "Poppy," he said, speaking urgently, "It's Harry. I need you. Tell no one."

Poppy sighed, she was still so tired. But, Severus would know that, so it was only his extreme need that had him calling for her.

She got dressed as quickly as she could, gulping down a few Pepper-ups, then she called one of the Hogwarts house elves.

"Would you take me to Professor Snape's home?" she asked it, she had absolutely no idea where it was. She knew that Severus felt very uncomfortable with house elves, but it seemed the most expedient choice of transport at the moment. And the house elves always understood that Poppy's patients, their ailments and their treatments were absolute secrets.

The elf bobbed his head until his bat ears flapped.

"Bring my things after you take me there. I don't know what I'll need yet. And its likely I'll be staying there, so I'll need one of you to assist me." Severus would have to make an exception to his no-house-elf-in-my-home policy.

The elf looked both frightened and doubtful, but took Madam Pomfrey's hand. She was the only one, other than the headmaster, the elves were authorized to Apparate into and out of the castle, due to the possibility that she might have just this kind of emergency.

They Apparated to a badly lit hall way. Poppy heard Severus rich voice speaking. After a moment, she realized, thunderstruck that he was not having a conversation; he was telling a story. The Wizard and The Hopping Pot, unless she was much mistaken. Complete with voices.

"Severus?" she called, not willing to embarrass the stiff and private man.

"In here, Poppy." he called from the door hanging half open, at the end of the hall.

Harry was lying on the bed, looking sallow in the harsh light of an overhead electric bulb. Severus had his back to the door (a position Poppy had never seen him take before). He was holding Harry's hand, with the back of his hand against the boy's face.

The tableau would have been touching, if black bruises were not rapidly coloring around Harry's throat. Bruises so large and dark that Poppy could see them from the doorway, where she stood.
Ligature lines as wide as her thumb was long. A school scarf lay cut in half on the floor.

"Severus...?" she said, questioningly, "What...?"

"I didn't do this, if you're wondering." He said, stiffly, without turning around, "Well, not directly."

In three steps, she crossed the room to stand beside his chair. She put her hand on his shoulder, "Severus, I know that. Now what did happen?"

"Apparently, it all became too much for Harry, all at once. I found him hanging, nearly unconscious, from the bar in his closet." The dispassionate voice was Severus at his most distressed.

"Oh, no." Poppy drew out her wand to begin her exam, "What have you done, so far? No, stay where you are." Severus had begun to move away from the boy, and the boy had whimpered in his sleep, clutching harder at Severus' hand, "Anything that keeps him calm."

"I gave him some sleeping potion. I didn't like giving him much until you arrived." He replied, settling back into his chair, "I put him into a body bind to prevent him from injuring himself further. I let him have his hands, as he seemed to feel the spell in his sleep and was fighting it and the potion."

Poppy moved to the other side of the bed, "I have to ask, do you know if he's claustrophobic? The body bind sometimes causes claustrophobia in people so inclined."

The potions master looked distant, "I believe he might be." he said.

She looked at the notes Severus' monitoring spell had begun taking, "Well, he's had worse injuries," she said, grimly.

Severus flinched, although her ire wasn't directed at him, "With nothing but his innate magic to help him," Severus said, as if to himself, "If Harry had been a Muggle child, they would have killed him."

"Hmm. I need to get some things. We'll use Skelegrow for the fractures, you kept everything well in line, so I needn't vanish anything. There's a lot of soft tissue damage, but I think most of that is mending itself rather quickly. He can have some healing draught for it, in the morning, when it won't interfere with the Skelegrow." she heard the pop that indicated the house elf had heard what she needed and gone to get it.

"We'll leave the body bind on him, until the spine heals. We'll have to watch him tonight, regardless. Would you prefer me to stay with him?" The glare that earned her had made many a student burst into tears.

"Harry is my responsibility," Severus said, harshly.

Poppy stopped what she was doing, to look across the bed at Severus, '"Harry' now, is it?" she said, gently.

Severus nodded. To her shock, tears were leaking from the potions master's eyes. She decided not to remark on it.

Instead she said, "Why didn't you want me to tell the headmaster?"

"Because if I saw him tonight, it would end with myself either dead or in Azkaban. I doubt I'd be very helpful to the child either way," He said bitterly.

Poppy blinked at that. She shrugged mentally, just as well, if Severus felt that angry at the
headmaster, that he stay away. It would do Harry no good to hear the adults arguing.

She, herself, would have words for Dumbledore when she saw him again.

"You will need help, Severus," she said, changing tack, "Even after his body's repaired, he can't be left alone. And you still aren't well, if you feel anything like I do."

Severus closed his eyes and nodded. It was a testament to how weary he was, if he was willing to have another person in his home, "Whom do you suggest?" he asked, not opening his eyes.

"Well, given the circumstances, I have one suggestion, and you won't like it," she said, carefully.

Severus opened his eyes to look at her.

"Remus Lupin."

"No," said Severus flatly, "Absolutely not."

"I know you've had your differences..."

"Differences?" hissed Severus, keeping his voice very low. Poppy notice that even in his outrage, he never let go of the child's hand, "He and his friends got Lily killed. He was involved in that prank that nearly killed me! Or have you forgotten?"

Poppy sighed, "Severus, he was as much of a victim of that prank as you. And that is the long past. He knows about this whole situation and he will not break confidence. Your only other choice is Molly Weasley."

"Molly won't leave her daughter," Severus said, with assurance.

"True," Poppy was unable to suppress a smirk, "But, if I tell her about this, she will have no qualms about moving Harry and yourself into her front room where she can keep a proper eye on you both."

"You wouldn't," snarled Severus.

"Care to test that theory?" Poppy said darkly, "Besides, Remus also has some education in mind healing. He can't pass any of the background checks to get licensed, of course, but I'd hesitate at this point to send Harry to even the most discreet of my friends. Their shock that the 'Boy-Who-Lived' was just another troubled adolescent might too much."

"I didn't know that," muttered Severus.

"You never asked," replied Poppy, a little stiffly, "So, which will it be? Remus or Molly's front room."

Severus sagged, capitulating, "Fine. Summon the Wolf."
Chapter Summary

In which Harry hears some stories.

Someone was speaking to Harry.

Dimly he was aware that someone was manipulating his head and neck and that seemed a little frightening, although he couldn't have said why.

It wasn't that important though, except once or twice when sharp sensations lanced through him, demanding his attention.

What was important was what the person who was speaking to Harry was telling him.

Sometimes, when he was very little, Harry would lay in his cupboard, listening to Aunt Petunia read Dudley bedtime stories. There was always an ache in his chest when he did so, knowing Freaks didn't get stories. The stories he listened to this way were stolen. He knew that. He also knew it wrong to steal. His Aunt and Uncle told him so. They told him when they caught him nicking food from the larder. When they caught him reading Dudley's books or standing outside Dudley's room, listening to Dudley's television shows, they told him that was stealing too.

Sometimes at school, his teachers would read a story. That wouldn't be a stolen story, but it would have to be shared with all the children in the class. It was never meant just for him.

Someone was telling him a story now, though. Not a stolen story, either. Nor a story he had to share with a room full of class mates. This was a story just for him. He knew this, without a doubt, because the teller was holding his hand tightly. And the hand was pressed against his cheek. A velvet sleeve trailed across his chin. The hand told him he was safe and wanted.

Harry had had dreams like this before, but never one so real. Never one that included scents of ginger and all spice or the warm heaviness of blankets.

"Your mother said this was her favorite one, Harry." The Teller-of-stories said, conspiratorially, "She liked the ones that made her laugh the best."

The Storeyteller began to tell the story of someone called Babbity Rabbity.

Harry drifted on the words. After a while, he lost the thread of the story and he just knew that the voice continued to speak, letting him know that he wasn't alone.

Later sharp pains began to stab into his neck. He cried out, more in startlement than pain, and then bit back the sound, fearing that Uncle Vernon would hear. It would hurt like hell if Uncle Vernon gave him a smack on top of this.

"Harry?" someone whispered, "Are you hurting?"

Harry tried to nod, but his head wouldn't move, "Yes," he croaked. He felt fuzzy and he was beginning to be alarmed. He was not sure where he was or who was still holding his hand, "It's not
so bad, though." He didn't want the owner of the hand to think he was a baby.

He couldn't help but clutch harder at the hand though, as it tried to draw away.

"Let go. I can give you a potion for it." Harry did as he was told, reluctantly. Harry opened his eyes a little, but the room was dark. The head of his bed was raised, so he was half sitting. The Someone was sitting beside him. In the dark, without his glasses, he couldn't see a thing.

The Someone made some stealthy sounds. After a second, Harry felt the pain begin to ease.

"I've spelled something for pain into you. It's not safe for you to try to swallow anything until the Skelegrow's finished," said the Someone. It was a man speaking. It seemed like Harry knew the voice, but he couldn't place it.

"Did I fall off my broom?" Harry wheezed, although he didn't feel that kind of hurt. His alarm decreased though. He must be at Hogwarts, if he'd just had some Skelegrow and the Someone was talking about potions. That was all right then, Uncle Vernon couldn't get him here.

"You don't recall?" The Someone asked, seriously.

"No." Now, Harry wondered if he'd been doing something stupid.

The Someone sighed softly, "We'll talk about it later," he whispered, confirming Harry's thought that he'd been doing something stupid. He wondered how much trouble he'd be in when he was better. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The pain potion made Harry rather more direct than he would normally be, "You were telling me stories." he said, "I've never heard stories like that."

"They're Wizard stories. They seemed to make you feel calmer while Madam Pomfrey was sorting out your neck." Someone replied, a trifle stiffly.

So, the Someone was the Storyteller from before. The one with the warm hand, that had a velvet sleeve.

"Thank you." It was important that Harry make the Storyteller understand, "Freaks don't get stories, you know." his words seemed a trifle slurried, "Children that people want get stories. Aunt Petunia told me."

"What did she mean 'that people want'?" asked the Storyteller, slowly.

"Promise you won't say anything?" Harry asked. He knew he wasn't supposed to say these things to strangers. Although, the Storyteller wasn't really a stranger, even if Harry couldn't place him, at the moment.

"You have my word." Harry knew somehow that the Storyteller could be trusted to keep his promises.

"She told me that my mum didn't want me, even before she died." He said in a hoarse whisper. It was Harry's darkest secret, "She said that my parents had to get married. That it would have been better for everyone if it had been me that died in that accident."

"Your mother didn't die in an accident, Harry." The Storyteller said, softly.

"Doesn't matter, she's still dead. Don't tell Aunt Petunia I told you what she said, okay?" his throat
was weirdly scratchy and sore, his voice raspy. It hurt to keep talking.

"I won't," agreed the Storyteller. Oh, of course. The Storyteller was a Wizard. He wouldn't know Aunt Petunia, "You know, Harry," The Storyteller said hesitantly, "Your mother actually went to some lengths to bring you into the world."

Harry didn't want to hear false comfort, "Aunt Petunia would know, though..."

"I know, Harry. I was there." The Storyteller seemed very, very sure.

Harry sat quietly for a second with his eyes closed, gathering his courage, "Will you..." Harry stopped, not wanting to upset the man. The Storyteller had been terribly patient with him, but it was stupid to ask for more.

The hand came back to take his. Harry raised it back to his face. It was the velvet sleeve that smelled like ginger and allspice, "Will I...what?"

"Tell me another story?"

A second hand reached over, coming into his limited field of vision, slowly. Harry cringed a little, nonetheless. The hand merely brushed his fringe out of his eyes, "Yes, of course I will." The Storyteller whispered, "As many as you like."
Harry is watched very closely, and Lupin arrives.

Eileen Snape Nee Prince had always been most adamant about living up to one's responsibilities. It was something she had impressed upon her son from an early age.

Even more, Tobias Snape had instilled in Severus a strong sense of Duty. Tobias was the perfect example of what happened when one did not meet one's responsibilities.

For years, Severus had thought it was his Duty to uphold his mother's honor. Originally, the Dark Lord had offered a way for a young Half Blood Wizard to gain honor and renown. A way to restore the nearly extinct Prince name.

When Severus found himself in too deep and discovered that the Dark Lord planned to exterminate rather than merely rule over the Muggle Borns, he had thought it his Duty to gain the Dark Lord's trust and stature within the Death Eater ranks, in order to protect his best friend.

Then, it was his Duty to help the other side, in order to protect her and her little family.

When he could not protect his friend, it fell to him to protect her son.

He'd buggered all of it up, completely. He resolved that he would not do so, in future.

He stayed the whole time Poppy was seeing to Harry's neck and then afterwards, while the potion was at its' most painful. Insisting that he take the first watch on the boy. If the sound of his voice telling childish stories calmed the boy, then Severus was not going to argue. He could not bring himself to leave his child like that; confused, distressed and in pain.

Although, the sadly befuddled conversation they had, when Severus gave Harry his most recent dose of pain potion, destroyed the last of his composure.

Dumbledore would hear of this, and Petunia would, most certainly, pay for her lies.

Severus had to remind himself, forcefully, that revenge would not help the child.

It might help Severus, however.

The thing was, before he was a Death Eater, Potions Master, or even someone's friend, the man had heard words of that kind before, directed at him. From the time, he was very small. Even all after all these years, he could hear his father's voice.

At the moment, his frayed Occlumency skills did not help him clear his mind of one particularly painful memory.

He remembered a door that was kicked open in the dead of night, waking him from a sound sleep. He was what, eleven? Twelve?
Eileen standing on the stair, white faced and shaking, "Tobias." she'd said, pleadingly.

Severus hadn't been sure what he'd done wrong. Or, perhaps at the time he'd known, but he couldn't remember what the real or imagined transgression was now.

"I dunno why the hell I stay with you two!" Tobias had yelled, "Get the fuck out here, you little bastard!"

Severus had stood at the end of the hall, careful to stay far away from his father's fist.

"Too bloody proud to go to school around here, eh?" the man had demanded, "And the money we gotta spend on books and fancy clothes."

"Tobias, you know..." began Eileen, softly.

"Sharrup, woman!" Tobias turned back to Severus, "If 'e 'adn'ta been born, I would'n'a got stuck wi' you, would I?"

Eileen took a step back, "Toby, don't say that. That's not true." she was pleading, rather than asserting.

Tobias turned back to Severus, "Y'know what? You're a bleeding parasite, you are. D'ya know what a parasite is, boy?" He had been certain to make sure Severus understood the meaning of what he was being called. He'd asked for the meaning and several examples, just to be sure the point was driven home.

So now, though he did try to clear his mind, Severus couldn't shake the memory, as he normally did. He put his hand over his face while his other hand firmly held Harry's, which the boy still pressed to his cheek.

Poppy came in with some tea. Severus tried, without success, to pull himself together. She patted his shoulder. If it had been anyone but Poppy, even Dumbledore, Severus would have been completely mortified. As it was, Poppy had seen Severus in worse shape than this. However, that had generally been after Death Eater meetings at the end of the War.

She was, of course, aware that half of his unwonted sentimentality was due to recovering from the Tribua spell.

Poppy shooed him out of Harry's room, just as dawn was coming up over the horizon. The boy's owl had to be let in. Harry had locked it out, no doubt.

Under protest, Severus slept for a few hours, coming back into Harry's room, after he'd showered, to relieve Poppy, sometime after eleven o'clock in the morning.

She sat by the small dark haired figure, reading an issue of the *The Modern Cauldron* Severus had laying around, under the watchful eye of the the boy's snowy owl who was perched on the back of the chair, rather than her accustomed spot. The owl turned and chirruped worriedly at Severus.

"How is he?" Severus asked Poppy, quietly.

"He's been calm since the Skelegrow finished." she replied just as quietly, "So, I've let some of the other potions wear off. He'll be less disoriented the next time he wakes."

Severus nodded, then the true trouble would begin,
"Have you searched his things, yet?" asked Severus.

"No." Sighed Poppy, "I suppose its best that we do it now." She stood and opened the trunk with her wand, both surprised that it was unlocked. Often it took a few minutes to get through a student's wards.

The clothing was stacked more or less neatly. Not obsessively so, as Severus had feared, given the whole house cleaning thing, but neat enough for a boy who puts value in his possessions.

Harry's trunk held heart-breakingly few personal possessions.

They slowly took out each item, shaking them out and checking the pockets. They found no illicit substances, Wizard or Muggle, so that was something.

Poppy took everything a rope could be fashioned from, shrank them and put them in a small bag. She took everything edged, the potion's knife, his pen knife for his quills and an ever-sharp quill she found. These also went into a small bag. His potion's kit, although that contained nothing toxic, went away.

Severus left him parchment, and the pen he'd transfigured to make it easier to write with his damaged hand, although he spelled the tip not to be able to cut human flesh.

They didn't find any books from the Restricted section, nor anything else that smacked of the Dark Arts. After Miss Weasley's misadventure, they were leaving nothing to chance.

Harry's wand and his broom, Severus took charge of. He locked the broom into his own upstairs broom cupboard and put Harry's wand in an inside pocket of his own robes.

The last thing in his trunk was a battered shoe box made of cardboard. Severus opened it gingerly, only to discover it was packed with food. A quick check showed that the box had a very good stasis charm on it.

"Well, this is why he can go so long between meals." remarked Severus dryly, though his heart contracted at what the stash of food might mean.

"Oh, Harry." sighed Poppy, "And we all missed it." She looked up, "Do you know, even before the incident with blowing up the aunt, Harry had sent notes to his friends asking them to send food? Molly told me. She said something to Albus at the time, but," Poppy shrugged helplessly, "Albus thought it just Harry's natural preference for Molly's cooking."

"Should we take it?" asked Severus, a little unsure.

Poppy shook her head, "The stasis charm is well done. Hermione must have helped him. If it makes him more secure, there's no harm. It might even be a good sign." she spread her hands in front of her, "It may mean that this was merely an impulsive act, rather than something he's been planning for a while."

Severus nodded.

"I'll watch him, now." he said firmly, "If you want to have an hour."

Poppy gave him a searching look, "I'll go down stairs and wait for Remus, then. I'll have a sleep on the settee. If he," she indicated the sleeping Harry, "Can swallow the healing draught, he can eat. make sure it's soft food. After that, he can get up, if he wants to. Just to the bathroom and back, though. And leave the binding charm on his neck. If he still can't swallow, or he chokes on the
potion, spell it into him and try again with another, in an hour." She stood and shook out her skirts, "Until we have a better sense of his mental state, he'll need to be on constant watch. Line of sight.'

Severus sighed. Harry was not going to be pleased, at all. He and Poppy had done this with one or another of his Slytherins every few years, since he'd started at Hogwarts, and he had helped other heads of house with suicide watches. If it was a wizard from a Pure Blood Family, they did their best not to let the family know that it was suicide they were watching for. Spattergroit and Dragonpox often required extended stays in the infirmary.

It was always exhausting, for everyone. And unfortunately, Spinners End was not furnished with anti suicide, anti self harm and accidental magic dampening charms, the way the infirmary was, so they'd have to keep Harry's wand away from him.

Severus finished packing Harry's things back into his trunk after Poppy left the room in a rustle of skirt. His hands lingered on one of the few personal things that had been in the trunk, a photograph album.

He sat down on his chair with it and opened it to a random page. Lily gazed up at him, holding a blackhaired baby in a soft blue knitted jumper. She smiled and picked up the baby's hand to wave at Severus, giggling soundlessly.

"Ah, Lily." he whispered, putting his hand on the photograph.

"Put it down." A cracked whisper, dry as a bone, "It's mine."

Severus started, looked up to see Harry's accusing green eyes looking at him, albeit slightly myopically.

"Of course," Severus agreed, "My apologies." he said civilly. He closed it and put the album on the bedside table, next to the child's glasses, "How do you feel?"

"Throat hurts." The boy blinked, "Why can't I move my head?" he asked, still in that painful whisper.

"You broke your neck. More precisely, you fractured one of your vertebrae." Severus said flatly, "And your larynx, that's why your throat hurts. Madam Pomfrey's mended the fractures, but the soft tissue still needs support. Do you think you can swallow some potions?"

The boy seemed to try to nod, but couldn't, so he said, "Yes." he went to try and struggle to sit up.

"Stay there, Harry." Severus told him, taking out his wand to lift the head of Harry's bed, so he was sitting up all the way.

Severus uncorked the vial and handed it to the boy who dutifully drank it. He sputtered a bit on it, but it all went down. The child swallowed again, as if surprised by the sensation

Severus picked up the boy's glasses and handed them to him. Harry put them on and peered at Severus in some confusion.

"How did I break my neck?" his voice sounded better. It also sounded wary and perhaps angry.

"It's not an uncommon injury, in an unsuccessful hanging." Severus sat back to watch the boy's face, "You do remember, do you not?"

Harry's face turned red, then white. Not being able to turn his head away, he closed his eyes. Severus
noted his hands fisted in his sheets and the angry set of his jaw.

"You should have something to eat." Severus said briskly, to forestall an outburst. That healing potion could use some time to work, before Harry started throwing tantrums. "Anything you prefer?"

"Doesn't matter." Harry said listlessly. He likely would have shrugged, if he could have moved his neck and shoulders that way.

Severus had asked that the house elf Poppy had brought with her, if he knew what the boy liked. The house elf had claimed that the boy ate rather omnivorously, so Severus conjured a bowl of the soup from the pot that was downstairs on the stove.

He set the tray on Harry's lap. Harry looked at the soup, sighed and ate a few spoonfuls.

"Professor?" he asked suddenly, turning a little red, "I need to get up. I need the loo."

"Of course," said Severus. He picked up the tray, helped Harry to his feet. Harry was still unable to turn his head or bend his neck, so that was a trifle awkward. Severus summoned the boy's dressing gown and slippers and helped him put them on.

"Did you say that Madam Pomfrey came from Hogwarts?" asked Harry.

"Yes." replied Severus, "She's downstairs."

"What for? I'm fine." Harry said, confused.

"You are a long way from fine," rasped Severus, "Tell me, is this the first time you decided to try to rid the world of your presence?"

The boy was silent. Probably the wrong approach, but it seemed that Severus never found the right approach with the boy.

They walked to the bathroom. Harry went in and tried to push the door shut.

Severus put a hand on the door to prevent him.

"Uh, sir?" Harry said nonplussed, "Can I shut the door?"

Severus sighed, "No, you may not." he said, evenly, "You have just attempted to take your own life. Until we are sure that you will not attempt to do so again, one of us will have you in sight, at all times."

"But I need..." Harry began, turning beet red.

"Yes, I realize." returned Severus, he turned his gaze upward toward the spot where the ceiling met the wall.

"Oh, you are kidding me." snarled Harry.

Severus crossed his arms, leaned sideways against the frame of the door, staring fixedly at his spot on the wall. This way, Severus could keep an eye on the boy without embarrassing both of them. Students always reacted badly to this part of the precautions. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout kept the young women under observation and Severus, or oddly enough, Hagrid were generally called in to keep watch on the young men.

"I really don't think I can, with you standing there, Professor." The boy said, mortified.
Severus didn't change his posture, but he flicked his wand so that the tap on the sink turned on. The boy turned his back to Severus. The posture and the running water apparently gave him enough privacy, because after a moment the toilet flushed. Harry used the running water to wash his hands, turned off the tap and wiped them on the towel.

"Before you ask," said Severus, returning his eyes to Harry's face, "Madam Pomfrey and I have searched your possession and confiscated anything with which you could injure yourself. Including your wand."

Harry's face was very white, now. Severus couldn't tell whether it was from anger, pain or fear. The child chewed his lips, as though holding back whatever he was going to say.

"Now," Severus continued, "Because your neck is held by a charm rather than a Muggle device, you have your choice of showering or a refreshing charm. The charm is not nearly so thorough as a shower, but it is probably more suited to your modesty."

"Charm sounds good." the boy said, in a very subdued voice.

Severus nodded, directing his wand at the boy, he cleaned the clothes and the child at the same time.

"Back to bed." Said Severus, "The healing draught isn't finished. When it is, we'll take off that binding charm."

Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion at Severus' tone. He was suspecting some trick.

"Why's it so...damp in here?" asked Harry as he climbed into bed. The bed's head was still raised, it was safer for the child's healing throat.

"The humid air is easier on your airway. Are you warm enough?"

"Yes." The sullen reply.

This was going to be a very long day.

"Would you like something to read?" Severus asked, attempting civility.

'Why did you bother?" growled the boy.

Not bothering to pretend to misunderstand, Severus replied, "Because, I had to."

"Because, you didn't want the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived to die on your fucking watch." Harry's fists were clenched in the bedclothes again.

"Do you imagine that no one would be hurt by your death, Harry?" Severus asked, flatly.

"I..." the child stopped, "No...not really." he said, quietly. He paused, looking a bit shocked by his own admission. He went on more loudly, "Who'd miss ME? They all want Harry Fucking Potter. They don't want me. It's like you always say...I've just got a little fan club. They just want talk about me behind my back and..." he trailed off, breathing hard.

Severus said nothing, for a moment, then, "So, your friends: you're still angry with them?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Griped the boy.

Severus consciously relaxed his jaw, trying to avoid a headache.
"So, how long before you ship me off to St. Mungo's or wherever Wizards ship off people who've
gone 'round the bend?" Harry's eyes were lowered, even though he couldn't bend his head.

"Is that what you think?" asked Severus, gently, "That you've gone mad?"

Harry looked up with that narrow gaze, again suspicious of his tone, "Well, it's not exactly normal, to
go and...do what I did, is it?"

"I give you my word, Harry, I'm not sending you anywhere," Severus said solemnly.

Harry's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"What?" asked Severus, wondering why the boy suddenly looked so confused.

"Did we...talk...sometime last night?" Harry asked, slowly.

"Yes. Just a short conversation," said Severus cautiously.

"Oh." Harry turned very red, "Were you...telling me stories?" he asked hesitantly, as if doubting the
veracity of his memory.

Severus nodded once, "Yes. You were somewhat agitated when Madam Pomfrey was working on
your neck. The stories seemed to help."

"We talked about Aunt Petunia, didn't we?" Severus didn't think Harry could blush any deeper.

"Yes, as a matter of fact." Severus said stiffly, having a hard time keeping the anger he felt at that
woman out of his voice.

Harry must have mistaken his tone to be directed at him, his chin started to quiver, "I'm sorry," he
said, shakily.

"For what?" Severus watched Harry's eyes dart around looking for an escape, knowing he couldn't
easily find one. Even turning over in the bed and curling up couldn't be done because of the charm
that was holding his neck still for healing.

"I'm so much trouble. I didn't mean to be so much trouble," Harry whispered, quickly, "I guess Aunt
Petunia was right. It would have been better if I'd died when I was a baby."

The potions master very nearly Disapparated from the room to go track down Petunia Dursley and
see if he remembered some of the curses he learned in his Death Eater Days.

Instead he drew his chair closer to the bed, "Listen to me, Harry." he said, putting his hand on the
boy's, "I know you were the best thing in your mother's life. She told me so."

Harry's breath was sucked in as a sharp gasp. He looked at Severus, his eyes moving over his face as
though looking for signs of deception or mockery.

Somewhere in the back of Severus' mind, it seemed that Lily was supplying him with the right words
to say to her son, "James Potter and she were married two years before you were born. Your mother
got extraordinary lengths to bring you into the world. She would have done anything to keep
you safe."

"How do you know?" the boy asked, petulantly.

"She was my best friend, Harry." Severus' chest ached, "If you needed a delicate, sensitive potion, to
whom would you go? You were not unwanted, nor unplanned. Quite the opposite. Your mother came to me for a potion to aid her in conceiving you." He said, telling the child as much of the truth as he was going to. Perhaps, someday...But, this was not news a boy in a fragile state of mind needed to hear. For now the child needed to know that he was wanted. That he belonged somewhere.

The boy went to pieces. Severus moved to sit on the bed, pulled him forward so that he was sitting up, with his forehead resting on Severus' chest. Severus didn't want to risk him choking, with all the damage to his larynx.

"Shh."

"But...but she's dead..." a whisper as carrying as a shout.

"Yes." Severus said, gently. There was nothing else to be said, after all.

There were other words, but they were lost in the torrent of the child's tears.

"Shhh. We'll talk later." Severus told him. He rubbed the boy's back, trying to calm him. This wouldn't help his throat at all.

The boy was only thirteen, he was recovering from some rather serious injuries and the healing potions he had taken tended to have sedative properties. It didn't take long before the child's breathing deepened and he went limp in Severus' arms.

Carefully, Severus lay the child back down, plucking his glasses off his face and putting them on the bedside table. After a moment's thought, he summoned his copy of Tales of Beadle the Bard, put it under Harry's glasses.

He sat back in the chair, contemplating whether he should call Poppy's house elf to bring him some tea.

There was a soft knocking at the open door. Severus turned with a jerk, raising his wand.

"Sorry." Said Lupin, standing in the doorway. He held his hands palms out, in front of his chest, "Poppy let me in." he said by way of explanation.

Severus' eyes narrowed. He wondered how long Lupin had been standing there, and how the man could move so quietly.

"You seemed to be doing well with him." Lupin said.

"Oh, yes," sneered Severus, wanting to hit the man. He finally dropped his wand tip, "So well, that he hangs himself, first chance he gets."

"No, I mean just now." Lupin said, "He seems to have formed an attachment to you."

Severus flicked his wand, incanting a silencing charm so he and Lupin could speak freely. Chances were, the child feigned sleep well, "A whipped puppy will come to the first hand that pets it." He snarled, making sure he was facing away from the child.

"And are, generally, the most loyal of companions." Lupin returned, mildly, "Poppy says you should take a break, for a few hours. Both of you have been up most of the night, she said."

"Where is she?" asked Severus, suspiciously.
"She's transfigured your dining table into a bed and your dining room into a guest room. She assumed you'd want to stay close to Harry?" Lupin replied.

Severus nodded, seeing that it was inevitable, "Fine, I'm going to bed. Wake me, if anything happens. Or if he should need...anything."

Lupin smiled, "Of course. By the way, I did have a piece of good news. I found Harry's dog. I didn't like to bring him without speaking to you first."

Severus felt like a small knot had undone itself. That was one less burden for the boy to carry. The child was devoted to both his familiars, even going so far as to make sure Hedwig would be cared for after his planned demise. Severus was sure that the assumed death of the dog had a huge part in Harry's seemingly sudden impulse to end his life.

"Yes." Severus said, "By all means, bring the dog. I'm sure it would be very helpful" he said curtly, before going downstairs to make himself that cup of tea.
Watching Harry

Chapter Summary

In which Harry finds that he is not alone.

"Harry?" A voice called, "Madam Pomfrey said you should wake up and try and eat something."

Harry didn't want to acknowledge the voice that was talking to him. He wanted to stay asleep, although his dreams had been uneasy.

What he really wanted was for the last few hours to be a bad dream. Barring that, he wanted to go to sleep and never wake up.

He carefully tried to turn his head. It would move now, and his neck didn't hurt. He cracked his eyes open, but he couldn't see the speaker. The room was dim, lit with the bedside lamp, rather than the overhead.

It wasn't Professor Snape's voice. Harry was glad of that. He wasn't sure he could ever face Snape again. How many times was he going to go to pieces in front of the man? Oh god, why did he have to go mental in front of Snape?

He took a deep calming breath, reminding himself that it could have been worse. At least he knew that Snape couldn't have a worse opinion of him.

"What..?" he rasped, his voice barely audible. He coughed, cleared his throat and tried again, "What time is it?" that time his voice was stronger, although still quite rough.

"Six o'clock." replied the man. He was sitting in a chair, near his head, Harry realized. He placed the voice. It was Professor Lupin.

"You should really wake up, now." Professor Lupin said again, gently, "You need some food to go along with all those healing potions." he leaned forward to shake Harry's shoulder.

Harry scooted away from the hand. Professor Lupin pulled it back. Harry couldn't really see the man's expression and tried not to look at him as he fumbled to put on his glasses, "Not hungry." Harry muttered. He did need to use the loo, but remembering Snape following him there earlier, he didn't like to say anything about it.

"Well, Madam Pomfrey wants you to try to eat something. I'm sure you want to use the bathroom, as well." Lupin seemed like he was trying to be kind, "Why don't you do that first? You'll probably want to get dressed as well. The Headmaster is supposed to be here sometime this evening."

At the mention of the headmaster, Harry's stomach dropped, "Wh-why's he coming?" Harry asked. Most likely, after this latest fiasco, Snape was ready to be rid of him, "Am I going to St. Mungo's, after all?" Harry blurted.

Lupin seemed to look at him in surprise for a moment. He shook his head and raised an eyebrow at him, giving Harry a mildly reproving look that was also somehow sympathetic, "No, Harry. Professor Snape is most adamant about that. He told me to tell you to put your mind at rest, should it
"Oh." Harry wasn't sure what to say now, so he didn't say anything for a few minutes. He just sat there. Lupin didn't speak either.

At last, the silence became too awkward. He swung his feet out of bed to stand shakily. Lupin stood up to steady him, then summoned some clothes out of Harry's still mostly-packed trunk.

The professor handed him a pullover and a pair of jeans. Harry sort of expected the man to leave, but realized that Lupin was indeed following up on Snape's threat that they would keep him in sight, at all times. Much to Harry's relief, Lupin tactfully looked out of the darkened window. Harry got dressed in a hurry.

"Uhh...I do need to use the bathroom." whispered Harry, when he was done, feeling completely humiliated.

Lupin nodded, opened the door and followed him to the bathroom. Like Snape, he stood in the doorway while Harry relieved himself.

Harry wondered how long this punishment would go on. This was probably something that Snape had devised to put him in his place. It was just Snape's style, to embarrass Harry as much as he possibly could.

"Why're you here?" Harry asked bluntly, as they went back to his room.

Lupin's kindly eyes regarded him, "I'm here to help Professor Snape look after you."

The bed had been made while they were gone. Harry threw himself onto his bed, having nowhere else to sit. The room only had one chair, "I'm fine." Harry said, putting his back up against the head board and crossing his arms across his chest.

"You are not fine" Lupin said softly, "I can see that you've been under tremendous stress for some time. It would help to talk about it."

Harry didn't reply. He was not going to talk about this with Lupin.

Or anyone.

He felt a terrible urge to cry, but he willed it back. He'd made enough of an idiot of himself in front of Snape, without Lupin witnessing it.

Lupin looked into Harry's face and sighed. He seemed about to say something else, but a knocking came from the front door downstairs. Harry heard the door open, Snape's voice, too low to make out the words and then the Headmaster's voice.

They'd probably told Dumbledore all about Harry's stunt. The man was probably coming to have a talk with him about it.

Harry felt sick at the thought. He would have to rehash the whole thing. He drew his knees up to his chest and put his head on them.

"I don't want to talk to anyone." he muttered.

"Harry, listen," Lupin looked at him kindly and Harry averted his eyes, "We do need to talk about what happened last night, but nothing you say will go beyond this room, if you don't want it to."
Harry shrugged and turned his face down, onto his knees. He heard Snape's halting tread on the stairs.

"Harry?" the man's use of his first name made Harry jerk his head up, in shock.

Snape stood in the hallway, leaning heavily on his cane again, "The Headmaster wishes to speak with you." Snape's face was dark with anger. Harry wondered how long it would be before the man read him the riot act.

Harry pulled his knees tighter to his chest. For all that Snape would probably shout at him the minute the other wizards left, Harry thought that was preferable than talking to the headmaster. Snape might rant and rave, he might be a complete bastard, but he hadn't sent Harry to live with the Dursleys. He hadn't sent the Minister of bloody Magic to talk Uncle Vernon into taking him back. For all Harry knew, Vernon's brand of discipline was exactly what Dumbledore had had in mind when he sent him there.

"Do I have to?" he asked, although he realized what the answer to that would be.

Lupin looked questioningly at Snape.

Snape replied, harshly, "No. As a matter of fact. If you don't want to see Dumbledore, at the moment, you don't have to."

That shocked Harry almost as much as Snape using his name.

"However, you do need to eat." Snape went on, "Lupin, will you give the headmaster Harry's apologies and see him out? I told him that it was probably too soon for Harry to speak with anyone, regardless. I'm sure you and Dumbledore can manage without us." he gave Lupin a nasty look.

"Of course, Severus." replied Lupin, seeming not to notice Snape's angry tone, "And then, I wanted to pop back to the castle for a little while."

Snape nodded, curtly, "Have you told Harry?"

Again, Snape used Harry's first name. 

"Tell me what?" Harry asked.

Lupin smiled broadly, "I found your dog. He was running loose in the Forbidden Forest. I'm going to go and get him, since Professor Snape said it would be all right."

Harry stared, dumbfounded at Snape, who sat in the chair Lupin vacated.

A warm light clicked on in Harry's chest, "Sir? Snuffles is alive?" he could hardly believe it, "And, I can have him here?"

Snape smiled a little, seeming almost human, suddenly, "Yes, I think so." He flicked his wand. Two bowls of soup and a tea pot appeared on the desk.

"See you later, then, Harry." Lupin told him, cheerfully.

Snape used his wand to levitate the soup to Harry, "Eat," he ordered, "You hardly touched your lunch. I need to give you another healing draught and it may make you sick to your stomach if you don't eat."

"Yes, sir." Muttered Harry. He was more uncertain what to do around Snape than ever.
Snuffles was alive and coming here, though. That fact alone was enough to make Harry want to cry again, this time with relief. Instead, Harry concentrated on getting the soup into his mouth. The warm food made him feel much more stable. He wondered if Snape had put a calming draught into it, although it didn't seem to smell of socks.

Snape was eating his own meal at the desk. He looked deep in thought.

"Tell me, Harry," began Snape, slowly in a low voice, "What were you thinking? Why last night?"

Harry began to shake a little and his interest in food evaporated, "I don't know," he said, honestly, "It just seemed like a good idea at the time."

"So, you hadn't been planning this long?" Snape caught his eyes with his penetrating gaze. Harry was completely sure the man was reading his mind, "When did you first start thinking about it?"

Harry swallowed, put the remains of his soup on the bedside table, hugged himself. Snape wouldn't look away.

The front door opened, closed. Lupin and Dumbledore must have just left.

"I-I guess when Neville died," whispered Harry, at last, "I just started wondering what it would be like..."

"The parallels between your life and Mr. Longbottom's life are rather striking, I admit." Snape nodded, "Had you thought of a method, even at school?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably, "No...not really...I just wondered about...things...like how it would feel...and stuff."

"How it would feel to die?" Snape asked in a low voice.

Harry shrugged.

"It never occurred to you that anyone would be upset by your demise?" Snape asked.

Again, Harry shrugged. He assumed lots of people would talk about how upset they were, but really, they'd get over it. They all had their families and each other. His family was already dead, after all. He didn't have anyone who'd really miss him.

Snape sighed, "I assure you, I myself was ecstatic that I was in time."

Harry started to open his mouth to make some snarky comment, when he stopped, remembering how Snape hadn't hesitated to do whatever it was he'd done for Ginny. He changed what he was about to say, "I'm your responsibility."

Snape nodded soberly, "More than that, however." Snape pulled up his left sleeve and leaned forward, showing Harry the inside of his arm. It was curiously scarred. There were rough places on it, that almost looked like it was some kind of symbol, if you squinted at them. Overshadowing that, however, was a long, fine, white line. It was the thinnest of ridges, running from the base of his palm almost to his inside elbow, "I begin to see that we have much more in common than I had imagined."

Snape pulled his sleeve back down. Harry's gaze when back to Snape's tightly controlled face. The man's eyes looked hollow.

"Did...did you do that to yourself?" asked Harry, aghast, "Why do you still have the scar?"
"It was a curse I invented." Snape said, his voice devoid of inflection, "I refused to give Madam Pomfrey the counter curse, until it was too late to prevent the scar. It is harder than one would think to kill oneself, I discovered."

"Why?" Harry's voice was no more than a whisper.

Snape closed his eyes, "Nothing dramatic, in retrospect," he said, "My father had begun to suspect certain things about me. Things that were even worse than my being quiet, bookish and a wizard." his eyes snapped open.

Thinking about how Uncle Vernon acted with Dudley, Harry could well believe that Snape's father might resent a "swotty little Nancy-boy", as Vernon referred to anyone with more academic achievement than Dudders (which meant almost everyone). However, that would lead one to other surprising conclusions, "Your father didn't like magic?" Harry asked, astounded, "But then, why did he marry a witch?"

"Ah, it was something of a wand point wedding. What your Aunt accused your mother of doing, my mother actually did. My father had not desired my birth, you see. In those days, an honorable man married a girl he had 'gotten in trouble'. My father fancied himself just that honorable. And, there's a sort of man who loves the idea that he has fathered a son to follow in his footsteps. I was a great disappointment to him."

Snape's mouth curved up at the corner in a self-deprecating little smile."His views on it were only slightly less extreme than your Uncle's" Snape finished quietly. He finally turned away, back to the desk. He poured two cups of tea, handing one to Harry.

"Why are you telling me this?" Harry asked, when he found his voice.

Snape's black eyes were distant. Rather than looking at Harry, he gazed somewhere over Harry's right shoulder. Harry thought Snape looked older, suddenly.

Snape took a sip of his tea, swallowed. Just when Harry thought Snape wasn't going to reply, he said, "I suppose I'd like you to understand that you're not alone, anymore."
Chapter Summary

Remus, Poppy and Severus decide to trust Harry, a little.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Spinner's End had always seemed to be under a bleaching enchantment. The whole street was a monochrome palette of greys. Tobias was always the grubby brown of the mill. Eileen had been faded blues and thin yellows. Severus always thought that, until he'd gone to Hogwarts, Lily Evans, with her red hair, green eyes and laughing pink cheeks was the most vibrant source of color in his world.

Now, her son (he's yours now too, Sev) lay in his upstairs guest room. The black dog at his feet, the white owl at his head. The color had been stolen from the boy's world as well. and Severus sat wondering how it could be restored.

He thought, with some dry amusement, that it was unusual for him to think in such florid metaphor. However, Lily's voice continued to provide a running commentary in his head and she had liked metaphor. Sometimes, when she had lived, he'd thought of them for the real Lily's amusement. Perhaps, he was doing so again, out of habit. They often weren't very good metaphors, but, as he remembered (to the mock indignation of the voice in his head), neither were Lily's.

He supposed it was the only way he could come up with the right things to say to Harry. Listen to the Lily-voice in his head; say whatever it was he imagined she would say. Because, Merlin knew, he was thoroughly out of his depth.

Certainly, he would have never, ever, under normal circumstances, have considered telling a student (but, Harry's not just a student, Sev) what he'd done to himself, all those years ago. Not even Dumbledore knew. Poppy had quarantined him to the hospital wing for a month, telling his head of house and the headmaster that he had been experimenting with spells and that the injuries were entirely accidental. For a month, Poppy and Hagrid had taken turns watching him, when Lily wasn't sitting by his side.

For two days, he'd refused to tell Poppy the incantation he'd used. She'd had to spell blood replenishers into him, when he wouldn't take them voluntarily. And use a Sticking Charm to keep the bandage on his arm, when he'd sullenly pull it off.

Unlike Harry, his had not been an act of impulse. The only reason he'd been caught was that Lily had come back from Hogsmeade early, finding the note he'd owled to her, on her bed. She guessed that he had gone to the top of the Astronomy Tower. The favorite retreat of morose students for generations.

The next time he'd come that close to finishing himself off, was after Lily's death. Then, it was Duty that had stayed his hand. Duty to Lily, to Dumbledore, to the boy.

Severus fingered the long white mark on the inside of his left arm, that disappeared under his sleeve,
as his tea sat cooling on the table. He heard Poppy moving around in the other room.

"Good morning, Severus." she said, bustling in. She was already dressed in a tidy set of yellow and white robes, while he had yet to make it out of his dressing gown.

Lupin had taken his turn watching the boy over night. After Severus had checked and double checked that the moon was, in fact, still waning.

"Mm." He grunted. She was well aware that he was not one for speech in the morning.

She poured herself tea from the pot and started putting jam on a slice of toast in the middle of the table.

He looked up, suddenly, "I don't believe I've ever apologized to you."

Poppy stopped, mid-motion, "For..?" she tilted her head, quizzically.

"Putting you through finding me in a pool of blood." Severus appreciated it as never before, what she must have gone through. He'd helped with suicide watches before, but he'd never caught a student in the act. He had thought taking the Dark Mark was the worst thing he'd ever done to anyone in his life; now he thought differently.

Poppy put her knife down, stretched out her hand to grasp his left hand. It was the one with the scarred wrist, which he was again examining, "I'm very glad we were in time, that day." She said, softly

He gave her a faint smile.

She squeezed his hand, "Severus," she said very seriously, "Were you aware that your Patronus has changed?"

Severus looked at her, blankly, "I beg your pardon?"

"The Patronus you sent me. It was different." Poppy said evenly, "When you get a moment, you might want to look at it."

Before Severus could reply, footsteps came down the stairs. Severus saw Lupin in the hallway.

"Where's Harry?" Severus demanded, sharply, as the other wizard came into the kitchen.

Lupin pulled out the chair next to Poppy, "I told him he could go on and have a shower and join us when he's done."

"You left him alone?" hissed Severus, standing quickly, starting out of the door. Lupin grabbed his arm.

"Severus. Stop." Lupin said, firmly.

Poppy was up and on Severus' other side, otherwise he would have drawn his wand on Lupin. As it was, he merely pulled his arm out of Lupin's grip, "Explain." he said, tersely, with narrowed eyes, looking down on the slightly shorter man.

Lupin looked at Poppy, as if for support, "I believe Harry's out of immediate danger, for the moment. It won't do any good to upset him further, with unnecessary precautions. I think fifteen minute checks will be sufficient, today. I've also received a promise that he won't do anything foolish without at least speaking to one of us first."
Poppy nodded, "I think that sounds reasonable." She said, looking at Severus, "Come sit down."

Only because Poppy asked it, did Severus, reluctantly, retake his seat, "If you are wrong, Lupin, and that child harms himself, I will hold you responsible." He growled. Not only would Severus hold Lupin responsible, but he'd inflict every injury onto the Wolf that the boy did to himself.

Severus pulled out the fob watch, and set it on the table where he could keep an eye on the hand, while he drank his tea. He pointed his wand at it and spoke the incantation so that it would tell him exactly where Harry was.

"How was his night?" asked Poppy, as Lupin took the seat next to her, and poured himself a cup of tea from the pot.

"Restless." Lupin sipped on his tea, a bit, "Woke up a few times. Nightmares. Didn't want to talk. I don't think he trusts me much." Lupin smiled, a little sadly, "It seems that in his experience, adults have been rather unreliable."

Severus and Poppy both winced, "When I think how many times I've sorted out his Quidditch injuries," muttered Poppy, "And, I never thought to look for anything untoward." she admitted, shamefaced. She raised her eyes to both the men, "I'm embarrassed to say, I sort of assumed Harry was just one of those children who were a little, well...fussy about food. You know. You remember how Lily was?"

The men nodded, looking away from her and each other.

"I just thought if he took after her, it wasn't that odd that he'd be thin and...well...a bit on the small side. And, if he was fast," she hesitated, "We like to tell ourselves these things are in the blood, don't we?"" She went on, quietly, "I just thought it was James coming out in him." She glanced apologetically at Severus.

Severus snorted, softly, "It seems, his speed is from spending most of his life dodging blows."

Lupin looked up sharply, "He said this?"

"No." Severus shook his head, "But, see how fast he moves if you raise a hand anywhere near him."

Lupin sighed, "What else do we know about his life with his relatives?" he asked.

Severus rolled his eyes, "Does it matter? They're appalling people."

"Half the difficulty we've been having with Harry is through lack of information." Said Lupin, firmly, "I'm beginning to believe that no one knows Harry nearly as well as they think they do."

Severus couldn't argue with that. He didn't think he knew the bloody boy at all.

"It seems to me that the best way forward for us is to..."

Severus raised his hand, to quiet him, realizing the watch hand was moving.

They heard the dog gallumphing down the stairs, although the boy made no noise. Poppy and Lupin turned around to watch the boy come in through the hallway.

Harry came into the kitchen, his eyes downcast, his hands dug deep into his pockets. He hovered in the doorway hesitantly, his shoulders hunched up around his ears, "Hello" he said, not raising his eyes. It was hard to see his expression under his messy, damp fringe.
The dog leaned against the boy's thigh. Harry took one hand out of his pocket to pet the dog.

Severus stood and moved over to the chair near the wall, so that the child could take the chair next to him, across from Lupin.

No one spoke. Harry wiped his nose with his sleeve, sitting down. The dog curled up in the hallway, Severus was pleased to see. He wasn't going to make an issue of it this morning, but he really did prefer not having to eat with the bloody great brute underfoot. He noted that the dog had a heavily patterned leather collar that Lupin must have provided.

Poppy buttered some toast, putting it on a plate in front of Harry, "Here you are, dear." she said, kindly.

"Thank you." the boy muttered. Severus poured the child's tea. He felt Lupin's eyes on them both.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Lupin asked.

Harry toyed with his piece of toast, but made no move to actually put it into his mouth, "I'm fine." not lifting his eyes from the tabletop.

Severus tutted, pulled the ever present potion vial from his pocket. He put it on the table, and slid it sideways, towards the boy.

'What is that?' asked Lupin, as the boy took the vial and drank it.

"Slow poison," snarked Severus, without thinking, irritated that Lupin was questioning him, in his own house.

Lupin and Poppy both shot Severus nasty looks, before Harry nodded, taking a bite out of his toast, "Rids the world of people who annoy their teachers." he said dryly, after he'd swallowed, "Don't worry, it takes about a hundred and fifty years to work."

Harry glanced sideways at Severus through his fringe, and took a another bite.

Severus looked back at the boy and smirked.

Lupin's eyebrows went up. A small smile played at the edge of his lips, even as he looked at them both of them, as if he'd never seen them before. Poppy smiled into her teacup.

"You know, I never realized how like your father you are." Lupin said, slowly.

Severus gave the Wolf a warning look, but Harry only shrugged, "Everyone says I look just like him." Harry began buttering more toast. He stopped suddenly, Lupin's words catching up to him, "You knew him, then?" he asked, in a small voice.

"Yes. I..." there was the tiniest flick of Lupin's eyes towards Severus, "Went to school with your parents. I was in Gryffindor house with James."

Severus noted how very careful Lupin was not to perjure himself.

Harry didn't ask anything else. That didn't bode well, that apathy.

Poppy summoned the eggs and sausage from the stove, serving Harry and putting the rest in the middle of the table.

It took a very short time for Harry to work his way through what Poppy had given him, and then she
gave him another serving, sharing a little smile with Severus. Harry was not the first student they’d had to feed up. Every year there would be students who wouldn’t or couldn’t eat. Harry was just better than many at hiding it.

When Poppy had finished her tea (and had been sure that Harry had eaten enough for her satisfaction), she stood, "I’m off to the castle. If you gentlemen need me, send for me. I’ll see myself out, Severus." She smoothed her robes down and sailed out the door, being careful not to tread on the watchful dog in the hallway.

Her sudden departure left the three of them at a bit of a loss.

"Erm..." said Harry, abruptly, "I'll just clear up, shall I?" he fit deed to word and started picking up plates from the table, taking them to the sink. He filled it with hot water and very efficiently began to do the washing up.

"Your dog will need a walk, soon." said Lupin, amiably, "I'm sure some air will do you good. We should both go out with him."

Harry shot Lupin a suspicious glance, "What?" he asked, a little hostile, "So we can talk about what happened?"

"We do need to discuss it." Asserted Lupin, gently.

"Why?" snapped Harry, snatching Severus' empty cup from the table. Magic crackled in the air. Severus felt the boy's wand heat up in his pocket, calling to its master's magic.

"Because it helps." Severus reached out to put his hand on the boy's, not wanting a repeat of the glass breaking, dish throwing incident.

Harry looked down at Severus' hand on his in confusion. Severus felt the tense muscles relax, after a moment. The boy's magic stopped pressing against Severus' eardrums. The child's eyes sought Severus' for the first time that morning. Severus wasn't sure what the child was looking for, so he endeavored to look reassuring.

When Harry pulled away, Severus let him go. Harry turned around, and put the dishes in the sink, before shocking Severus by asking, very quietly, his back to the men, his head bent over the sink, "Do you feel up to coming, Professor Snape?"

Lupin smiled broadly. He looked Severus with his eyebrows raised and nodded vigorously.

"I...think I could manage a short walk" replied Severus, completely taken aback.

Chapter End Notes

For those who have asked, up until the other night, Severus' Patronus has been a doe, as in Canon.
Walking in the Rain

Chapter Summary

A walk with Snuffles, Remus and Snape.

Snape made his slow way up the stairs to get dressed, leaving Harry alone with Lupin. This was the first time Harry had been alone with the man, although Lupin had been trying to get him by himself for a quiet word all term. Harry dawdled over the washing up as long as he could. It meant he didn't have to turn to face the patiently waiting man.

"So, how has your schoolwork been going this term, Harry?" the professor asked, picking up the tea towel to help dry and put away, "Professor McGonagall tells me that your marks have dropped a bit."

Harry stared at the man, who took a wet dish out of his hand. After a second, he made sense of what Lupin was asking him. This was the sort of getting-to-know-you conversation he had been trying to have with Harry, since the start of term. It wasn't any less awkward now. Worse, there was no way to escape.

He shrugged. Since Neville died, and with all the other business going on, homework just seemed like far too much trouble.

"I know things have been very difficult for you, Harry. I'd like to help, if I can." Lupin's voice was soft, concerned.

It was like that when he was in primary school. First, the nurse had wanted to speak with him, and then, after she had visited the Dursleys, she'd sent him to speak with the school social worker. The social worker had been very kind, and rather pretty, as he remembered. How could Harry have explained to her that he was just That Freak who needed to be shut away? At the time, he'd brushed off her concern, not wanting another scene at the Dursleys.

How was he supposed to explain to this oh-so-understanding man, that it would have been better if he, Harry, had died, rather than his parents? That he suspected that Dumbledore had sent him to the Dursleys, because the old wizard knew the Dursleys would know best how to cope with him?

Thinking about Dumbledore just made Harry want to be sick. A glass slipped out of his hands, into the sink.

Lupin turned back around from putting up a plate, he put his hand out to stop Harry from picking up the glass again, "I think you should sit down. You don't look well."

"I'm fine." gritted Harry.

"No, come along." said Lupin, "Sit down." He made Harry put the dish rag down, and took him by the elbow, making him sit back at the kitchen table. The black dog came into the room to sit by Harry's side, and leaned against his leg.

"You're looking very pale." said Lupin, putting the back of his hand against Harry's forehead, "And, you're a bit clammy."
The boy jerked away, "I'm fine," he muttered, again.

In fact, Harry was feeling ill, right through Snape's potion. This was the first time the potion had failed him. Harry swallowed against the urge to throw up. He shut his eyes, putting his face in his hands, elbows on the table. He sat like that for a while. Lupin didn't try to touch him again, for which Harry was grateful.

Snuffles whined and rested his head on Harry's lap, feeling warm and solid. After a few minutes, Harry took one hand from in front of his face, and put it on top of the dog's head.

"Harry?" Snape had come back into the kitchen, finally. Harry looked up. Lupin was sitting across the table from Harry, his chin resting on folded hands, watching him patiently. Snape stood at Harry's shoulder, leaning on his cane, "Are you all right?" the potion's master asked.

"I...Yeah..." Harry managed to croak, still feeling a little off balance, "Sir." He added, for good measure.

Snape looked at him searchingly, repeating Lupin's gesture of pressing the back of his hand to Harry's forehead, "Madam Pomfrey suggested that some calming draughts would not go amiss, over the next few days." Harry pulled away, not liking that they were both treating him like an absolute infant.

The tall man pulled out the chair nearest him, sat down, and leaned his cane against the table. He pulled his wand from his sleeve, flicked it, summoning a couple of vials of potions, which came to rest on the table at his elbow. Then, Snape scooted his chair over until he was a somewhat closer to Harry than the boy would have liked.

Harry darted a look at Lupin, who smiled reassuringly, although a slight frown appeared between his eyebrows.

Snuffles growled low in his throat.

"Harry, tell your dog I'm not going to eat you." said Snape, in a soft, indecipherable voice, "Take off your glasses, and look at me, please."

Obediently, Harry looked up, taking off his glasses with one hand, while scratching Snuffles' head soothingly under the table, with the other. All Snape did was light the end of his wand to look into his eyes. He nodded sharply, as if satisfied, "Take this." He pushed one of the potions at Harry, "Do you have any pain in your neck or shoulders?"

Harry shook his head, putting his glasses back on. When he uncapped the potion, the smell was very strong, "Essence of sweaty sock." he muttered, "My favorite."

"Yes, I have the house elves collect them after Quidditch matches." replied Snape, idly. Harry couldn't tell whether Snape was joking or not and decided not to ask.

Very slowly, as if to make sure Harry saw what he was doing, Snape brought his hands up to prod the sides of Harry's neck, frowning when Harry pulled away, "Does that hurt?" Snape asked, sharply.

"No." It didn't, Harry just didn't like people fussing over him.

"Then hold still, and tell me if this hurts." Snape continued to prod the side of Harry's neck, moving his hands forward to touch the front of his throat "It seems you're fairly well healed from this latest stunt," Snape said, when he was finished, "Physically, that is." He pushed another potion bottle at
Harry, "Drink that one, as well."

"What's this one?" asked Harry, it was bright yellow, with grey sludge at the bottom.

"Hypericum, crocus sativus and phosphate of potash." replied Snape, blandly.

It tasted the way fresh hay, and floo powder smelled. Harry dutifully drank it and handed the vial back to Snape, who banished it and the other somewhere, with a flick of his wand.

After that, Snape picked up his cane and rose awkwardly to his feet, glancing at the other man, "Lupin, for god's sake, change into something that won't have the neighborhood brats marking you as someone to throw stones at."

Lupin was still wearing his grey wizard robes, Harry realized. Snape was wearing black wool trousers, and brown sweater, with his hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Oh. Ah." Lupin hesitated, as though a bit flustered, "What would you suggest?"

Snape rolled his eyes "Allow me?" he asked, raising his wand.

Lupin stood as well, making a gesture of assent.

The potion's master stood a moment, as though considering. With a mutter he gave his wand a few complicated little flicks, and transfigured Lupin's clothes into a charcoal wool blazer, with leather patches on the arms, and dark grey trousers. "There, they might still throw stones, but the Ministry won't need to make an appearance."

Lupin gave Snape a half smile, as though Snape's jibe amused him. The Defense professor produced a lead for the dog, handing it to Harry, "I've found that...Snuffles, did you call him?...is quite well trained. It seems his former owner did a good job with him."

Harry leaned down, and snapped the leash onto the heavy leather collar. It looked expensive, "Professor?" Harry asked Lupin, "Where's this collar from?"

Lupin waved his hand dismissively, "Oh, I transfigured it from a belt. Keep it."

Looking at Lupin's wardrobe, Harry wasn't at all sure Lupin could afford to be giving away bits of clothing like that, especially not expensive ones. Even transfigured, his shirt collar was frayed, the sleeves of his jacket a bit threadbare. However, that was the professor's business, Harry supposed.

Clipping on the lead, Harry noticed that there seemed to be runes carved onto the collar. Next time he saw Hermione, he'd have to see if she knew if they meant anything.

As the three of them emerged into the late morning drizzle, Lupin walked to Harry's left, with the dog between them. Snape stalked along on Harry's other side; oddly, there was something comforting to Harry about the man's presence.

None of them spoke for a few minutes. Harry kept taking surreptitious looks at Snape, thinking about the long white scar on the inside of the man's arm. He also considered Snape in general.

No one could ever say that Snape was a nice man, but it appeared it didn't matter to Snape whether Harry was That Freak or The Boy Who Lived, he'd look after either one, just the same. There was comfort in that, a solidity that Harry had never experienced.

Before now, Harry had known he needed to be in people's good graces, needed to earn his keep, in
order to get anything he needed. At the Dursley's, they made sure he understood how much he was disliked, how much of a burden he was. His existence depended on making himself less of one.

There were teachers in Primary school who disliked him, some of them almost as much as Snape did. One particularly nasty woman had had a habit of making the students check each other's papers. Piers, Dudley's best friend, had sat beside Harry in her class, so he always got to check Harry's. For the first three days of the term, Piers had changed all Harry's answers, so that it seemed that Harry hadn't done the homework properly.

Harry tried to tell the woman, but she was in Aunt Petunia's book club, and was taken in by Aunt Petunia's "Harry-is-a-nasty-bit-of-work" speech. After that, Harry had just stopped bothering to complete the homework. Nobody wondered why, the next year, that he did so well in maths, with a teacher who did like him.

It just didn't seem right, all of a sudden. The Dursleys treated him badly because they didn't like him. They hated him because he was a Freak and a Burden. The Wizarding World treated him like he was special, because he had survived an attack by a Dark Wizard.

Snape was no different, it seemed. He harassed Harry in class, even picked on him, from the moment they met. Unfairness was the way of things, if you were liked you were looked after, if not, well, you shifted for yourself, as best you could.

But, he'd saved Harry's life, and he'd saved Ginny's as well, without hesitation.

It was true that he disliked Harry, but it was for his own reasons, whatever they were. He was taking decent care of Harry, at the moment, because it was his job. He did it, because that was how "responsible adults" behaved.

"Have I grown a second head?" Snape asked, the third time he caught Harry staring.

"I... no, sir." they walked on.

People like Hermione and Ron might be able to fool themselves that adults were fair, and had their best interests at heart. Hell, Harry had wanted to believe that himself, but that just wasn't his experience.

Harry had hoped that the Wizarding World might be different. That he might be able to find people to help him there. He'd tried to explain the night he blew up Marge, but Fudge and Shacklebolt had told Harry straight out that Dumbledore said he had to go back to the Dursley's, even after Harry had told both of them that Vernon was going to beat the shite out of him.

First it wasn't any big deal, and then three weeks later, they decided it was all abuse.

Lupin finally spoke, "You look angry." he observed.

They were stood in a little park. Like the rest of Spinner's End, it had a sad, ill used look about it. Some of the swings were missing from their chains and the seesaws had been covered in graffiti. Someone had left some empty beer bottles lying about, under a metal table. The stubs of cigarettes littered the ground. It started raining in earnest, splashing into the puddles that stood here and there on the saturated ground.

Snape pulled his wand out and the rain stopped falling on them. Lupin led the three of them to the metal park bench. Snape spelled it dry, before he sat.

Harry stayed standing, while Lupin sat next to Snape. The dog sat next to Harry, rather than nosing
around as one would expect.

"What are you angry about, just now?" Lupin asked, mildly.

Harry shrugged, crossing his arms across his chest, "Do you know why Dumbledore send me to live with the Dursleys?" he found himself asking, suddenly.

The two men looked at each other, uneasily, "Petunia was your last known blood relative." Snape said, slowly, "The Wizarding World holds bonds of blood paramount."

Well, at least that was confirmation that it was Dumbledore.

"Is that why you're angry?" Lupin pressed, "Because you were sent to the Dursleys? It would be natural if you were, you know."

"I don't want to talk about it." Snarled Harry, "Nobody's ever cared before. Bit late to start now." He uncrossed his arms and stuck his fists into his jacket pockets, keeping a tight hold on the dog's lead. The boots Snape had bought him were doing an admirable job of keeping his feet dry. Harry stared at his feet, poking at the wet ground with his toe. It was probably the first time he could remember walking in the rain, without getting his feet soaked.

"There are many people who care about you." Lupin said, "Sadly, no one in the Wizarding World could imagine your relations would be anything but delighted to have you."

Harry hunched his shoulders more, "Well, they weren't." he hissed, "They hated having me around. I bet they wouldn't have taken me at all if they weren't getting a small fortune. But, I never knew anything about that. They told me they took me out of charity. Aunt Petunia used to tell me that my mum and dad were drunk when they smashed up their car and got themselves killed. She told me," Harry swallowed, "My mum was as common as dirt, and I'd've been better off if she'd gone to London to-to...you know...get rid of me...when she was pregnant."

Snuffles whined and nosed at the boy, probably tired of being ignored. Harry took his hand out of his pocket to scratch the dog.

Neither of the two teachers said anything, and Harry refused to look at them. He had the idea that they were silently communicating with each other, though. The anger drained out of him, leaving him cold and tired. He sniffed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. "Look," he said, finally,"WHat I did-I know it was stupid. I won't do it again. You won't have to worry about it...I'm sorry...I know I'm nothing but trouble..." He trailed off, glanced up at the two men.

Lupin still sat calmly, although he looked sad. Snape, though...Harry was shocked by the look of raw pain on Snape's face. It was gone so quickly that Harry wondered if he'd imagined it as Snape's face took on his customary impassive expression.

Only half of Harry's attention was on what Lupin was saying, he was busy watching the other professor, trying not to look as if he was staring. Snape pulled a handkerchief from his inside pocket. He wiped both his eyes with it, muttering something to himself about "Damn rain." He glared at Harry, as if expecting to be contradicted.

Harry blinked; hadn't Snape just cast a charm to keep the rain off?

Was he upset about Harry?

"Professor?" Harry said to Lupin, although he kept looking at his guardian, "I think Professor Snape needs to get back to bed."
Lupin looked at Professor Snape, with some concern, "You may be right." He stood and extended a hand to the other man.

"Get off, Lupin," snarled Snape, "I'm fine." He staggered to his feet, with the help of his cane.

Lupin shook his head, "No, I think Harry's quite right, actually." He took the taller man's arm, the one that wasn't holding the cane, much like he'd taken Harry's elbow earlier, "Come along."

Apparently, Snape needed help enough that he didn't protest again, but walked slowly between the other two.

"Er, Professor Snape?" said Harry, in a small voice, as they walked.

"Yes?" The professor was leaning heavily against Lupin, Harry saw.

"You'll be all right?"

It was Lupin who answered, "He'll be fine." He said, firmly, "He needs rest, and some looking after, that's all."

"I do not need 'looking after'. " Growled Professor Snape.

"Of course not." Agreed Lupin, mildly, "Perhaps, you'd prefer to explain that to Molly Weasley. Poppy told me, we could still arrange to have you both moved into her front room."

Harry nearly laughed aloud at the picture that presented.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Harry spills a little more information to his minders and Lupin learns a lot more about the Muggle world.

Chapter Notes

This chapter may be disturbing to some readers. Please remember that this is rated for teen and older.

Let me make clear: The views and opinions of these fictional characters do not necessarily reflect my own.

The Hogwart's grounds were covered in snow. Great fluffy flakes were falling out of a low sky, that was slowly turning black. Severus was using his wand to clear the ice from the Astronomy Tower. He set up the telescope he carried, although, in this weather, it seemed a trifle futile. Then, he remembered that it wasn't stars they intended to watch.

Vaguely, he thought that Lupin needed a better telescope. Perhaps he'd ask Iris if she could make some better lenses. It was very hard to see Harry, from here.

Light footsteps clicked up the stone steps. Severus turned to see Neville Longbottom smile at him, from the archway. It was not an expression he'd ever seen on Longbottom's face before. For some reason, Severus felt a faint tinge of horror at seeing the child.

"Hello, Professor." The boy said, coming forward. He spoke to Severus without the cringing obsequiousness that had been such an irritant. He didn't say anything else, just came to stand beside the man, looking over the grounds. Severus tried to cover his discomfort by fiddling with the nobs of the telescope, and looking through the eyepiece. There was something very wrong with the boy standing there, but Severus couldn't think what it was.

"Thank you, sir" Longbottom said, finally.

"I beg your pardon?" Severus asked, uneasily, glancing at the boy beside him.

"You saved Ginny. You didn't need to." Longbottom's voice was thick.

"Of course I did," snapped the older Wizard, "She's a student. I'm responsible..."

"Not for her." Longbottom contradicted him, softly, "If you hadn't offered, Madam Pomfrey wouldn't've used Tribuo Vita. It wouldn't have occurred to her to ask you to. It's just too much to ask."

Severus shook his head, irritably, "Don't be ridiculous. Minerva..."
"Offered. The same as you did. She understood what she was doing." Neville (when did the boy become "Neville"?) looked pensively out over the grounds again.

The boy nudged Severus' elbow, after a minute, "There he is." the young Wizard pointed.

Severus looked through the telescope, turning it the way the child directed.

On one of the black, leafless trees, a figure hung from a rope, several feet off the ground.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" gasped Severus, flicking his wand at the figure, causing the rope to slacken, "Spiro!" He prayed that his spell would be effective, with him so far away.

Cursing the anti apparition wards, Severus leapt to the top of the wall, and threw himself off.

Halfway down, he realized he could NOT remember a single hover or cushioning charm. Nor any other spell which would save his life from this fall.

"I'm sorry, Harry." he groaned, to himself, "I'm sorry." The fear he felt wasn't for himself, but for the boy. Lily's boy. The boy was going to be alone again, and for some reason, that was unbearable.

Much to his surprise, Severus' fall slowed, and he found himself set gently onto his feet, on the snowy ground. James Potter held out his wand, obviously responsible.

"I'm sorry, Snape." The other man said, "I'm sorry." He looked so like Harry, it made Severus heart lurch in his chest, "Tell Harry...tell him, I love him. Tell him that I'm sorry I couldn't stay." James dropped his wand tip, turned his face away and walked off into the swirling snow.

The grim clouds swallowed James' figure and Dementors emerged from the blackness where he had disappeared.

Without Severus casting her, his Patronus appeared at his side. Dementors swooped futilely, warded away by her influence.

She turned to look a him, and Severus realized she was no longer a doe. She...no...HE was a yearling stag, with small antler spikes, barely longer than his ears.

Severus stared at the creature, unsure of the implications.

Harry stood beside him, now. On the other side than the young stag, "I'm here, Professor." The child's voice was hollow, defeated. Severus turned to face the child. Pale as death, livid rope marks around his neck, "If I'd just died when I was supposed to, I wouldn't be such a burden on everyone." Harry tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace, "Maybe, you should have just let me go."

Severus put both his hands on the child's shoulders, "I will not. You are my responsibility."

The boy looked up, his eyes so shadowed, they were black, behind his glasses, "You don't want me. You're just doing your duty."

There were people standing around him, Severus sensed, watching them, judging his reaction. Another time, that might have made him retreat into reticence. Say less than he meant, for fear of ridicule, or exposing a weakness.

There was no time for that, though; Lily's son stood there, demanding some answer. Pain written over every tense line of his young body.

Severus gazed down into the boy's black eyes (no, wait, that wasn't right. Didn't Harry have green eyes?), "Listen to me," Severus growled, softly, "Love can't exist without Duty. Without
responsibility, it's nothing but a greeting card sentiment." he squeezed the child's shoulders.

"Love?" faltered the boy, "Love?"

Severus jerked his chin at the Silver Stag, "You see?"

The sound of a door opening woke Severus.

"Professor?" whispered the boy, "I brought up some tea. Did you want breakfast? You've been asleep since supper, last night." He sounded like he didn't like to wake Severus up, if he was really asleep.

Severus struggled to sit up. The boy stood there, tea tray in hand. The curtains were half open and sunlight poured into the room.

"Thank you, Harry." Severus said, feeling bemused, still in a fog between sleeping and waking. He looked closely at Harry. The boy's eyes were indeed green, not black.

He smiled tentatively at Severus. It was a fleeting expression; he bit his lip, and looked away, after a second, "Should I put it in the breadbox?" he asked, nodding at it.

"No, I'll have it here, thank you." Severus said, shaking himself.

Harry settled the tray onto Severus' lap, "I'll be back for the tray, in a bit." he said, quietly.

"Wait, a minute, Harry." The older Wizard said.

The boy turned around at the door, looking wary.

Have you eaten?" asked Severus.

Harry shrugged, "Not really hungry." he said, "Professor Lupin said I could eat later."

Severus rolled his eyes, "Did Lupin give you your potions this morning?"

"Yessir." The child muttered, crossing his arms across his chest, sullenly.

"Did you take them?" Severus asked slowly, as though addressing a five year old.

Harry shrugged, "Not yet." He admitted.

Severus resolved to have a word with Lupin, "Those potions are not optional. Neither is eating." He paused, looking a Harry searchingly. The child's eyes had dark circles under them, and he was still far too pale for Severus' comfort.

There was a lid over over Severus' plate of food. He assumed Lupin must have conjured it, because nothing like this existed in his kitchen. He slid it off, and eyed the exceptionally large portion.

He pulled his wand from underneath his pillow. With a wave, he conjured a plate and extra fork from the kitchen. With precise movements, he dished half the omelet onto it.

"Here," he held the plate out to Harry, which the boy took, "Sit." he indicated the end of the bed. Still wary, the child perched with the plate in one hand. Another flick of his wand summoned Harry's potions, which landed on the tea tray.

Severus took the lid off of the little bottle with the blue potion, handed it to Harry, "Take that one
now."

"Yessir." Not the most polite tone, but the boy complied.

With the child fed, Severus felt like he could attend to his own meal. After a few bites, he asked, "Did you make this?"

Harry shook his head, "No, Professor Lupin cooked." he said thickly, with his mouth full. He put his hand over his mouth when he realized it, clearly waiting for a reprimand.

Severus ignored it. Lapses in table manners were to be expected, with this potion, "I like yours better." he said, instead.

"Oh. Erm. Thank you?" the younger Wizard replied uncertainly.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Severus didn't have much of an appetite. He put his fork down and drank his tea,

Harry looked at what Severus had left on his plate, "Shouldn't you eat more?" he asked pointedly.

Severus smiled a little, "No, I'm merely in need of rest."

The boy looked away, "I asked Professor Lupin why you're so worn out. He told me that you gave up a piece of your soul, to bring Ginny back. I think Mrs. Weasley might have said something about it, too. He said it was a very dangerous spell." Harry looked back, "You were going to do it on your own, weren't you?"

It was Severus' turn to look away, "If I'd had to." he admitted gruffly.

"But, why?" Harry shifted uncomfortably, "She's not even in your house."

A thrill of unease went through Severus, then. The conversation was uncomfortably like the one Severus had had in his dream, "Why would I allow a student to be hurt, if I could prevent it?" he snapped, "Or did you think that responsibility was somehow a singularly a Gryffindor trait?"

"I didn't mean it like that." The child was defensive, "It's just that Lupin said...He said it damages your soul." Green eyes came to rest on Severus' face, again, "But, you knew that. So...why?"

"Because I was there, and I could, I suppose." The potion's master sighed, "It will heal." Severus looked sharply at the dark haired child, "Why did you follow Ginny Weasley into the Chamber of Secrets, rather than go and find a teacher?"

Harry fidgeted some more, "We did look for a teacher, we took Lockhart."

"I should have specified a competent teacher." The older Wizard snorted, "Nonetheless, why didn't you seek out one of the other professors, when it was clear that Lockheart was a fraud?"

For some reason, that made Harry's mouth twist, as though he'd bitten something sour, "Because no one would listen." he hissed, "No one ever listens." his eyes were bleak. He wasn't merely talking about that one instance.

"What happened the night they took you back to your uncle's?" Severus asked, gently. He'd been wanting to ask for a while, this seemed like a good opening.

Harry stood, piled his finished plate onto the tea tray, took Severus' empty tea cup and picked up the tray. He didn't say anything, just pressed his lips together, and then, "I don't want to talk about it."
"I would like an answer." Severus grated harshly, when it seemed like Harry was just about to take the tray and leave the room, "Sit down."

Harry put the tray on the little table. He sat back down at the end of the bed, looking at his hands, "You already heard." he said, quietly.

"I heard that you blew up your Aunt, because she said things about your parents. I also heard that Shacklebolt found you, and Fudge took you back to the Dursley's." Severus said, going back to his gentler tone of voice, "It seems, that your relatives had to be convinced to take you back. How did Fudge manage?"

The boy sighed, clenched his hands together, studying his thumbs. The knuckles on his hands got white, before he spoke, "I told him that Uncle Vernon was going to go mad." his voice barely above a whisper, "Fudge just told me that it served me right, running away and making everyone worry, that something happened to me." A bitter smile curved the boy's lips, "Uncle Vernon would have been happier if something had happened."

Harry paused, swallowed, "Fudge said to me, if I was his son, I'd get a hiding I wouldn't soon forget." Harry looked up at Severus, "I didn't hear a lot of what he said, after that. I sort of tuned it out. I just remember him telling Uncle Vernon that I just had a little too much energy. That I needed to be taken in hand. Marge suggested a cane and Fudge said that it had never done him any harm, as a lad."

Severus closed his eyes, it was entirely too easy to see how that was interpreted by Dursley.

He swung his feet out of bed, scooting down towards where Harry was sitting. The boy's jaw was clenched, and when Severus put out a hand, he flinched away and put up his own hand, palm out, warding Severus off.

The older wizard drew back, "I'm sorry." He said simply.

Harry's cheeks flared red, and he dropped his hand.

Severus and Harry both froze, as they heard a knock on the front door.

The sound of footsteps, human and dog as Lupin went to answer it.

"Yes?" Lupin said, politely.

"Oh, hello." said Mrs. Cook's voice, uncertainly.

"Are Severus and Harry still here?" She asked, sounding concerned, "I know that Severus has been ill and I haven't seen Harry in a few days. I was getting worried."

"Ah. Erm. He's fine," said Lupin, awkwardly. "I'm sorry, I just got here a few nights ago. You are...?"

"Mrs. Cook. from next door. Ah...and are you..."

"Remus Lupin. I'm just here to help Severus, what with him being ill and Harry..."

"Oh. What happened to Harry?" Mrs. Cook was uncomfortably perceptive to Lupin's concerned tone.
There was a pause. Severus looked at the boy to see how he would take Lupin's next words. Harry was white as a sheet, his hands fisted around the blanket.

Lupin replied smoothly, enough, "Nothing terribly serious. He's just...well, feeling a little isolated. I had another commitment, or I would have come with them from the start.

"You're a...friend...of Severus, then?" Mrs. Cook put a bit more emphasis on the word than she needed to.

Lupin, unused to Muggle customs and unaware of their prejudices, didn't catch her meaning, "Oh, yes. We've known each other since our schooldays. And, I work with him. I teach at the same school, and I'm the school counselor." Poppy must have given him that phrase.

"Oh, that's nice." Severus knew, if he could see her, she'd be beaming, "It's good to see someone looking after Severus, finally."

Severus knew he was going to have to shut Lupin up, sharpish. He pulled his wand from under his pillow and transfigured his pajamas into a sweater and trousers. He was not going to talk to the woman in his dressing gown again.

He tucked his wand into his sleeve and snatched up his cane. He staggered down the stairs, to do what he could to salvage the situation, before it got any more out of hand.

The dog brushed by him in a rush, looking for his master. Severus heard Harry's bedroom door shut, as the boy took the opportunity to escape the awkward conversation.

Severus did his best not to growl. He made his slow way to the door, with both of them staring at him, "Mrs. Cook." He said, as politely as he could.

"Hello, Severus." Mrs. Cook said, cheerfully, "I just wanted to remind you of my invitation to tea, this afternoon. As your still here?"

Good god, was it Sunday already?

Lupin jumped in to speak before Severus could stop him, "That's very kind of you. What time?"

The elderly woman beamed, "4:00?" she asked.

Severus considered telling both of them to go to hell. For some reason, however, he found himself reluctant to hurt the 's feelings. He nodded, curtly.

This soft heartedness must be a result of the damned spell. He snorted to himself, soft headedness, more like.

"I'll see you, then." Her eyes twinkled like Dumbledore's on a good day.

Lupin shut the door behind her, when she turned to go.


The man at the bottom of the stairs, turned to look up at him, eyebrows raised, "I'm not sure I understand, Severus." he said, in that mild voice that just infuriated Severus.

A glance up the stairs showed that Harry's door was firmly shut. He'd taken his dog into his room, else the thing would have been still there, scrabbling at the door.
Severus pulled out his watch. "Bedroom," the hand that had HJP said. Nowhere near either Mischief or Mortal Peril. He'd modified the spell to include self harm under the category of Mischief. He tucked it back into his pocket.

Deeming it safe enough for now, Severus beckoned Lupin into the front room. He closed the door, and cast a one way silencing spell.

"You do realize, you've given that woman the idea that we have an intimate relationship, do you not?" Severus hissed.

Lupin looked at Severus blankly, "I beg your pardon?"

Severus threw himself down on his chair. He was trembling with anger. Terrible scenes with his father ran through his mind. Everything was so raw, as though it had happened yesterday.

"Severus?" Lupin stared at him with some concern, "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not bloody all right." Severus snarled, "And this afternoon, I will go and Obliviate that conversation from that woman's mind."

Lupin just looked confused, "Because, she thinks we're together? Why on earth should she care?"

Fucking Pure Blood bastard, thought Severus, savagely. He kept his voice low, however, "Because, it is not always particularly safe to prefer one's own gender, in the Muggle world.

"Sorry?" The other wizard took the chair opposite Severus, and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, "You've completely lost me."

"I have no wish to discuss it, here." Severus shut his eyes. He could feel old Toby's presence oppressing him, although it was impossible that Toby could come back, even as a ghost. He was haunted merely by memory, "Suffice to say, in many Muggle circles, it is as feared and reviled in the same way werewolves are in our world."

He opened his eyes. Lupin stared at him, horrorstruck, "But, why? It can't harm anyone." Like any Pure Blood, Lupin assumed that sexual orientation was only the business of oneself and one's lover.

"There are people who believe otherwise." Grated Severus, "My father was one." he admitted, painfully, "He reacted about as well to the suspicion as Black's parents reacted to his being sorted into Gryffindor."

Lupin paled, his young, worn face taking on a grim cast, "How did you know about that?"

"Regulus. He bragged about it to the whole common room." Severus said, darkly.

Lupin looked away, "So, your father had...a problem with..."

"Lily told my parents she was my girlfriend." Severus said bitterly, "After my father tried to beat the 'unnaturalness' out of me. After I did this" For the second time that week, he pulled up his sleeve to bare his scarred wrist.

He looked into the other man's hazel eyes. Lupin broke off the eye contact to look down at the long white scar.

Lupin made a sort of choking sound, before he said, "I'm so sorry." The other man's voice just oozed with sympathy. He made a movement with his hand, as though to reach out to Severus. He thought
"Shut up." This was not something Severus was going to discuss. Not in this house, that still had memories sunk into the very walls. Abruptly, all the adrenaline ran out of him. Pulling down his sleeve, he tilted his head back against the back of the chair, closed his eyes, "Just, shut up."

It seemed only a second later, when he heard someone calling his name, "Severus?"

"Don't shake him," that was Harry, "He reacts badly to that." He really did sound like Lily.

"Ah. All right." the voice called more loudly, "Severus?"

He opened his eyes, "Mm?" Lupin held out a cup of tea to him. Harry was standing in the doorway with his dog.

"You fell asleep, again." Lupin told Severus.

Severus rubbed one eye with the heal of his hand, took the teacup with the other.

"So, it's all right if I take Snuffles out for a walk?" Harry was asking Lupin.

"Don't be too long." Lupin replied, absently.

The front door opened and shut. Severus abruptly became more awake, "Should he be going out alone, without his wand?" he asked sharply.

Lupin nodded calmly, "The dog will keep him safe enough from most threats, I think. Including himself."

"There's still a bloody dark wizard after him." grunted Severus.

Lupin seemed to start, as though he'd forgotten. Then, "You did say he had a portkey that will bring him back here if someone breaks the wards, did you not?"

Reluctantly, Severus nodded.

"Well, there you are." Lupin smiled. His face grew grave the next minute, and he sat back down in the chair, "I wanted to ask you..." he said awkwardly, "What did Harry mean, yesterday? When he said about his Aunt saying Lily should have gotten rid of him?"

Right then, Severus felt like shaking the man. However, what Petunia had said Lily should do was almost unknown in the Wizarding World, "She's told him his mother should have had an abortion." at the man's blank look, Severus decided to be clearer, "Muggle doctors can safely induce miscarriages in women who, for whatever reason, decide they cannot bear the child."

The other man went absolutely grey. Severus nearly pulled his wand to conjure a bucket, Lupin looked so ill "What?" Lupin gasped, "And this is allowed?"

"Since 1967."

"That...that's barbaric. Inducing a miscarriage in a woman can get you a life sentence in Azkaban." whispered Lupin.

"Not in the Muggle world." Severus snidely informed him, "And, please recall that Muggle women have had reliable contraceptives for only about fifty years. And even they don't prevent all pregnancies."
"But...who doesn't welcome a child?" still whispering.

"Those too poor, too ill, without family or friends." Severus replied tonelessly.

"Oh, surely, when a man hears that he's going to be a father, he doesn't just abandon the woman?" Lupin said, doubtfully.

"Lupin, you were raised among Pure Bloods. Have you noticed how most Pure Blood Wizard families have only one or two children?" Severus snarled, "This interbreeding that the Pure Bloods take part in practically assures that their family lines will fail, unless they take action, unless they introduce some Muggle blood into their lines." He pushed his hair back from his face in agitation, "Regardless, no Pure Blood woman would choose to terminate a pregnancy that her barely fertile husband managed to conceive. Even a woman out of wedlock welcomes a child by a Pure Blood Wizard. She need only apply to the Wizengamot for a Breach of Promise suit, after all."

"Well, why don't they just..."

"You are getting off the point!" Severus shouted. Suddenly he was glad Harry was out of the house, "Whatever you think of the practice, Petunia has been telling Harry for the last twelve years that he should never have been born."

Lupin nodded, "Yes. Yes, of course." he still looked ill, but no longer ready to spew on the carpet, "It will take time to disabuse him of that notion." he paused, "I wish I'd not taken Dumbledore at his word. I wish I'd checked on the child."

"And me." replied Severus.

Both men went silent. The hollowed out place in Severus' soul ached, but not so insistently, now. It seemed that the child's presence was slowly, but surely, filling the empty space.

Chapter End Notes

Please remember that the Wizarding World is at least 50 years behind the Muggle world in terms of rules and social mores.

Some readers felt that the "life in Azkaban" sentence appeared a little far fetched. It comes from this actual British law, enacted in 1861:

Sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861

Section 58 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 provides:

58. Every woman, being with child, who, with intent to procure her own miscarriage, shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, and whosoever, with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman whether she be or be not with child, shall unlawfully administer to her or cause to be taken by her any poison or other noxious thing, or unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable . . . to be kept in penal servitude for life . . .
Section 59 of that Act provides:

59. Whosoever shall unlawfully supply or procure any poison or other noxious thing, or any instrument or thing whatsoever, knowing that the same is intended to be unlawfully used or employed with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable . . . to be kept in penal servitude . . .

This is from the Wikipedia.

Abortion was made legal in the UK by the Abortion Act of 1967.
Harry reflects on recent events.

Harry supposed that, all things considered, he would rather have Professor Lupin come and help Professor Snape, rather than bother Mrs Weasley. She had enough to deal with, and more than likely, she’d want to get Harry to talk about what was bothering him.

Unfortunately, it seemed that his current minder was very interested in getting Harry to talk. Lupin kept badgering Harry about details regarding what was going through his mind when he'd tried to...do what he did.

Harry's mind still shied away from the ugly word.

Escaping Lupin didn't stop the questions. This morning, after giving Harry half his breakfast, Snape had been intent on grilling Harry for answers to questions the boy did not want to think about. He didn't want to discuss with his guardian what had happened after he'd been taken back to Privet Drive. Anyway, Snape knew all about it, he'd seen the marks and the examination had apparently told him the rest. Why did he want to talk about it?

Fortunately, Mrs. Cook had knocked at the door, interrupting them. When Snape had headed downstairs to talk to her, Harry fled to his room with Snuffles, escaping the embarrassing conversation. No one had come after him, leaving him to sit and think for a while, with Snuffles to keep him company.

Idly, Harry read the book that someone had left sitting on the bedside table. It was a book of children's stories, and it seemed that it had once belonged to Snape, going by the note in the inside cover. Harry thought it was odd that Snape, of all people, would leave a book of fairy stories lying around.

Still, the stories were oddly comforting. They were new to him, as they were wizarding fairy stories, although some of it seemed familiar. He was well into the fourth one, before he realized that these were the stories Snape had been telling him the other night.

Lupin came up the stairs about lunchtime, "Harry, you need to eat." he said, gently, beckoning. "And, you should know, we're going to Mrs. Cook's for tea, this evening."

"Really? All of us? Professor Snape too?" Harry seriously wasn't sure Snape could stay both polite and awake, for long enough to have tea with the little old lady. Snuffles jumped off the bed as the boy stood up and stretched, carefully putting the book back on the night table.

Lupin nodded, with a little smile on his face.

"Where is Professor Snape?" Harry hadn't heard him come back up to his bedroom, and he didn't think he looked well enough this morning to really be up and around.

"Asleep in the living room."
"Should we wake him to eat, do you think?" Harry asked Lupin, taking a peek into the living room, as he obediently came down for lunch, to make sure Snape was still breathing.

Snape was sitting slouched in the chair with his hands folded across his chest and his head tilted back. Somehow he looked younger than he did when he was teaching class.

"No, I don't think so." the professor shook his head, "He needs the sleep, more than anything else."

Harry nodded his head, following the other man into the kitchen, "Why's he so tired?" Harry asked.

Lupin started putting the makings of sandwiches on the table. He looked up at Harry with haunted eyes. "It's said that the casters of Tribuo Vita experience something very like near-death themselves. They say this spell changes people profoundly. One of the reasons it's almost never done. Madam Pomfrey is very weak, as well, and I understand Professor McGonagal still can't stay awake for more than an hour at a time."

The younger wizard started getting the lunch things out of the cupboard, and putting them on the table. Snape seemed to prefer to keep using the mismatched crockery that was in the kitchen rather than the nice stuff in the dining room. Screwing up his courage to ask what he wouldn't ask Snape, Harry blurted, "Why's he been so...I don't know...weird?"

Lupin, who had been cutting the loaf of bread with his wand, looked up, tilting his head to the side quizzically, "Weird how?"

The boy put the plates down, crossing his arms uncomfortably, he said "Like he sort of..." he stopped, shrugged, "Never mind."

The professor sighed, "I think Professor Snape is very sympathetic to your difficulties, Harry. I think, in his way, he's become fond of you."

It would have to change him pretty bloody profoundly, for that to happen, Harry thought, disbelievingly.

And yet, there was the copy of Tales of Beadle The Bard sitting on his bedside table. A book with, "With love, from Mother," written in a cramped hand that resembled Snape's, on the inside front cover. It had been sitting there, underneath his glasses, when he woke up.

This all gave Harry a lot to think on. It was good to have something that might explain Snape's current, uncharacteristic, behavior.

None of that explained Harry's own behavior. He'd never been like this. No matter what Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia or Dudley had served up, Harry had always been able to hold it together. Since Neville had died, it seemed like everything was coming apart around and inside him. It was highly embarrassing to have Snape witness Harry's continued cracking up.

"I know he was very worried and upset about your attempt at harming yourself." Lupin finished, softly.

"I'm sorry." He muttered, realizing that Madam Pomfrey had been here, and she was apparently just as sick as Snape, "I didn't mean to cause such a problem for everyone."

"I should tell you," the professor caught and held Harry's eyes, "There are some rather serious consequences for this sort of action." He told him darkly, "It really wouldn't do to draw attention to it. I wouldn't mention it to anyone in the Wizarding World."
"Consequences?" Harry asked.

Lupin frowned, "Someone your age could be forcibly confined to St. Mungo's indefinitely."

Harry heard the qualifier "your age", he didn't like to ask what could happen to an adult Wizard. He remembered some of the things that Uncle Vernon used to say they should do about the "Nutters and freaks." He used to say that if someone botched the job of killing themselves, someone ought to hand them the knife to finish the job.

No one would want to hear that the Boy Who Lived was such a pathetic little freak.

"Did...does Dumbledore know?" Harry asked, very quietly.

Lupin went back to cutting the bread, "We, ah, we actually told the Headmaster you'd had something of an accident. Professor Snape felt that we should leave it up to you, what you wanted to tell him."

The man avoided Harry's eyes.

Harry felt himself sag with relief. Right now, he didn't know how he felt about the headmaster, so he was relieved that he wasn't going to have to explain this whole fiasco to him. He wasn't sure what he was going to say to Dumbledore next time he saw him, now that he knew for sure that it was he who'd sent him to live with the Dursleys.

Lupin handed Harry the plate with the bread on it and there was another plate with various lunch meats. Harry wondered if they were getting food from Hogwarts now, since he certainly hadn't bought any of this, and it looked a bit fancier than what the corner shops had.

The potions Harry was supposed to take were also on the table. He downed them without comment, then set to eating his lunch.

Neither of them spoke while they were eating. Harry was afraid if he said anything, Lupin would lead the conversation to topics he'd rather not deal with. When he was done, he took his plate to the sink and washed it.

"Why don't you take Snuffles for a walk?" Lupin said suddenly, surprising Harry.

"Can I?" the boy asked, hopefully.

Lupin smiled, "Yes, I think it might do you good." The man turned serious, "However, I don't want you to be gone long. If you are longer than twenty minutes, I will come and fetch you."

Harry nodded, "Yes, sir." He picked up the dog's lead from where it was hanging on a hook by the door. Snuffles gave a whine, and a hopeful little bark, clearly he wanted a walk.

Lupin looked sternly at the dog, "I expect you to behave yourself, too." He said to Snuffles.

Harry gave Lupin a half smile, which the man returned, looking a little shamefaced. Apparently, Lupin was a bit like Aunt Marge or Hagrid about animals. Dogs at any rate; Hedwig didn't seem to like him much, but she was often aloof with strangers.

The man had been doing it that morning. When Harry had gotten up, he had walked to the stop of the stairs, where he heard Lupin having a one-sided conversation.

"Get your bloody great nose out of it. I see him." Lupin had said, snappishly. Harry knew he couldn't be talking to Snape, or perhaps the man was a good dueler. Otherwise, Harry was sure that they'd be sending Lupin back to Madam Pomfrey in a bucket, "I'm sure we'll get him, eventually." A
pause, "All right, get down. You're getting hair all over me, you shaggy thing." he went on.

The boy crept down the stairs, wincing as the fifth stair creaked. Either Lupin didn't hear it, or he didn't take any notice, because he kept talking, "And, you needn't look at me like that, it's not coming off." Now, his voice sounded full of good humor.

At the bottom of the stairs, he turned the corner to see Lupin, his back to the door, putting what looked like a plate of eggs and sausage down for Snuffles and then, put something else on the floor for the dog.

"Good morning, Harry." Lupin had said, turning, clearly hearing him in the hallway. It looked as though he'd been up for some time. He was neatly dressed in a button down shirt and a pair of grey trousers. He seemed less tired than Harry had yet seen him. The man fussily put some parchments into a pile and banished them with a tap of his wand.

When Harry came into the kitchen, he saw that Snuffles had a saucerful of tea he was lapping up. Harry had shaken his head, amused, "My Aunt Marge gives her dogs tea." he said.

Lupin's face turned sort of pink, like he was embarrassed, "Yes, well, my mother always did as well. Habit, I suppose." The man smiled sheepishly. At least he seemed aware it was a little silly to talk to Snuffles like he was a person.

"What was Snuffles trying to catch?" asked Harry, happy to have something to talk about that didn't include his feelings.

"Oh, he saw a rat." shrugged Lupin.

"Ew." Harry said, little horrified. Aunt Petunia would have thrown fits, if there'd been rats in the house on Privet Drive, "We've got rats?"

Lupin had shrugged, "Old house. I'll fetch a Rat-Away charm from Hogwarts. Would you like some breakfast?" he hadn't sounded keen on discussing rats.

Harry had claimed lack of appetite, and Lupin hadn't pressed him. He gave Harry his potions, and then a tray to take up to Snape.

Snape wouldn't let Harry get away with missing breakfast. He'd summoned a second plate and given him half of the food from his own plate.

Lupin may have expected that, though. He'd given Snape a huge portion.

As eager as Harry was to get out of the house, he cautioned Lupin not to shake Snape awake, before he left, not wanting Snape to explode the other man or something.

There was quite a bit more than tea with Mrs. Next Door on Harry's mind, as he and the dog wended their way to the little park at the end of the street.

Harry wondered how Ginny was doing. He'd dropped Ron a note last night, to ask. He had considered calling Hermione (so strange that there was a phone here he was actually allowed to use), but he was afraid he'd start spilling everything that had been happening if he talked to her, so he contented himself with writing her a very bland note, as well. There was no way he was telling her what happened.

He stood under a tree, while Snuffles discreetly did his business behind it. The dog was strangely fastidious that way, liking to go the length of the lead, and go behind something. Perhaps that was
another trait of dogs who belonged to wizards.

Both Snape and Lupin kept asking Harry what had been going through his mind. To be honest, Harry wasn't entirely sure, it had seemed like an excellent idea at the time. Harry couldn't even really remember how it had felt, after he kicked the chair away from him, except that it hurt.

He remembered Snape sitting with him, though. That was so strange. He remembered Snape telling him stories and holding his hand, of all things. His guardian must have sat up all night with him, even as ill as Snape was. Every time Harry had drifted towards wakefulness, the man had been there.

That was more than Harry could ever remember having. Even at Hogwarts, he'd never really had an adult who was willing to sit with him like that.

He remembered Aunt Petunia telling Aunt Marge it had been their duty to take Harry. Clearly, Snape viewed the concept differently than she did.

That long scar of Snape's haunted Harry, as well. The graphic evidence that he and the potion's professor had a great deal more in common than either of them had imagined.

Snuffles finished what he was doing, and came back around the tree. He grasped Harry's sleeve gently in his mouth, tugging towards Snape's and whimpering.

"All right, all right." Harry smiled at the dog's antics. He was probably hungry for his dinner, "We'll go back."

Snape and Lupin were having a quiet word in the living room, when Harry and Snuffles got back in. Whatever the conversation was, it sounded intense, but cut off when Snuffles gave a little yip.
Tea and Treasure

Chapter Summary

Our boys have tea with Mrs. Cook and she has something for Severus.

This was a mistake. Why he was going along with this, he had no idea; but here he was, standing with Harry and the Wolf in Mrs. Cook's rose pink and ivory front hallway, handing her their coats.

He hoped he wouldn't have to Obliviate the whole meeting from her head. He was so damn tired, and he didn't trust Lupin not to make a mess of it. He was not going to risk the Ministry getting involved in his affairs, as they surely would, if the woman spoke too loudly about the wrong things to the wrong people.

He'd never been inside Mrs. Cook's house before. She'd asked him over many times, between the time his mother died, and when his father died. Every time she saw him, in fact.

At that time, Severus had often been in and out of Spinner's End. Another obligation he was duty bound to fulfill; to ease his father through his last illness. In the end, it had been a much quicker and more merciful death than Severus would have envisioned. One of the reasons the Dark Lord (knowing so little of the maladies that affected Muggles) had presumed that Severus had had a hand in it.

The day old Toby died, Mrs Cook had been there, when they'd taken the old man's body away. She'd asked Severus to supper that night, quite insistently, until he had snarled at her to leave him be. After that, he put Muggle repelling charms on the house.

These enchantments were delicate. When a house was taken out of the Muggle World, one couldn't just make the thing disappear. Commonly, the enchantments just caused the houses to fade from the minds of the surrounding Muggles. Sometimes, older Muggles held on to the memories of places longer than one would expect. Unfortunately, Mrs. Cook seemed to be one of those.

Thinking about it, Mrs. Cook had seemed to pay more attention to Severus comings and goings during the summer, than any of the other Muggles. It occurred to him that she would often speak to him, and each time she had asked him to her home. This was the first time he'd accepted.

Now, the woman would have to be shut up properly, before she started gossiping around the neighborhood. Severus wouldn't like to think that the old lady would get stuck in a nursing home, because she kept on about a house that didn't exist. Worse yet, her daughters might come and verify that the Snape house was still there. Obliviations all the way around, then. Probably, a fine for having broken the Secrecy Statute, to boot.

A hand on his wrist made him jump, "Severus?" Lupin was standing much too close to him, while Mrs. Cook was hanging their coats, "Are you all right?"

Severus squared his shoulders, "Fine." he grunted, tersely. He tried to take a half step away from the other man, but met the wall.

"Come in, through here, lads." the Muggle woman was directing them into the dining room where
she had their tea already set out.

He irritably pulled his elbow out of Lupin's grasp, as he followed the elderly woman. He stumbled a bit, but Harry was at his side, and steadied him. The boy met Severus' eyes, and gave him an apologetic little half smile. Severus stared at the boy, suddenly wondering why it had never occurred to him before; Harry's hair, although as tangled and prone to stand up as Lily's husband's, was black as pitch. James' had been a dark honey brown.

No, Lily had not used James' whole hairbrush.

"Sir?" the child said, quietly, "You all right?"

He must look like absolute shite, if both the Wolf and the boy were hovering.

The dining room was, like what Severus could see of the rest of the house, decorated in shades of rose pink. Clearly the woman's favorite color. The walls were painted a soothing off-white, so that the pink never became overwhelming. He couldn't help thinking of Petunia's living room, obviously these pastels were currently fashionable.

Mrs. Cook gave him a long, concerned look, "Still not well, Severus?" she said, "Seems like more than a case of the flu." she pulled out a chair so he could collapse, rather gracelessly, into it.

He wasn't sure what to say, but Lupin jumped in, "Severus was traveling in the tropics this summer. Picked up some nasty bug while he was there. They've only just worked out what it was."

Severus decided that, as lies went, that wasn't a bad one. He nodded, tiredly, "Malaria." he grunted, lest the woman think he was carrying typhoid or something.

She nodded soberly, "Ah. Nasty thing, that. My brother, Reg, had that in the War, you know. Takes ages to get over."

At least her manner hadn't changed after what Lupin had said to her this morning. She still seemed friendly enough.

Severus was too damned tired to be doing this. He still wasn't sure what he was doing here. What he was going to do when school was reopened, he had no idea. Four, five hours of being awake, and he was ready to crawl back into bed for another sixteen hours of sleep. He supposed the stress of caring for Harry after his unsuccessful attempt at hanging himself was catching up.

The boy stood next to him, looking as if he were prepared to catch Severus if he fell over. Damn it. "I'm fine, Harry," he said, in as civil a tone as he could manage, "Don't fuss."

"Yes, sir." The boy stepped back a bit. He had become incredibly respectful, all of a sudden. Perhaps, Severus should look out the window to see if there were Four Horsemen standing in the road.

Mrs. Cook went out to the kitchen and came back with a plate of sliced meat, "Harry, dear? Would you fetch the potatoes?"

Harry nodded, and headed into the kitchen, coming back out with a bowl of boiled potatoes and something else. Severus didn't pay much attention to what it was.

Harry was as quiet as a mouse while they ate. Perhaps, pretending he didn't exist. Leaving the conversation to the adults. Severus had little to say, so that left Lupin to make small talk with the
woman.

It did seem that Lupin was staying away from personal topics, opting instead to answer the woman's questions about himself, "Mm, I've spent the last few years studying in Canada." He was saying, "Only just returned, you see." he replied in answer to one of them.

Severus felt Mrs. Cook give him a speculative glance, and then was surprised to see something like disappointment in her eyes, "Oh, yes?" she said, returning her attention to Lupin.

"And, with school being closed and Severus not being well, he asked me to stay with him until school reopens." Lupin went on smoothly.

It seemed Severus wouldn't have to Obliviate the poor woman, after all. Good, it was damnably hard to remove memories as specific as one conversation. Unlike the Ministry, Severus was not convinced that Obliviations were entirely safe. Especially on older Muggles. He wondered how many poor bastards were walking around with presumed dementia, when in fact it was badly done Obliviation.

When they'd finished, Harry quietly offered to do the washing up.

Mrs. Cook smiled widely, "That would be lovely." she said.

"I'll help you, Harry" said Lupin, genially, standing up and clearing some of the plates. Severus and Lupin had discussed this, this afternoon. They were trying to break Harry's habit of acting like a house elf.

The minute the two wizards were out of the dining room, Severus felt a tingling of magic across his skin. Both the door to the hallway, and the door to the kitchen slammed themselves shut.

Cursing himself and his stupidity, Severus drew his wand from his sleeve. The room was silent.

The old woman didn't seem to notice anything was amiss. Her eyes were unfocused, and she remained perfectly still, "I have something for you, Severus." she said, gently. Her voice was a little hollow. After a second, her eyes focused on him, and she smiled apologetically, "Isn't that curious? I'd forgotten all about it." she laughed a little, as if at herself. She stood up mechanically, ignoring the wand Severus had aimed at her.

Severus kept his wand on her, as she moved to the china cabinet. She opened the glass door, and drew out a box, about the size of a large jewelry case, that was covered in blue velvet.

She didn't try to hand it to him, rather she set it on the table, in front of him, "Eileen gave that to me, before she died, poor thing." Mrs. Cook said, mournfully, "She said I should give it to you."

The blue was his mother's favorite color. Severus extended his hand, then drew it back, warily.

Mrs. Cook sat down again, folded her hands on the table, "She told me to tell you that it was a gift for 'The Half Blood Prince'. She said you'd know what that meant."

The wizard stared at her, shocked, "Did...did she tell you what was in it?" he rasped.

Shaking her head, she said, "No, just that I mustn't give it to anyone else. You see?" Anyone else was presumably Severus' father, or the Ministry..

Severus did see. Or, at least he thought he might. Very slowly, he tapped the box with his wand. The box glowed golden for a moment, and a tinkling strain of music, as from the Muggle music box that Eileen owned, drifted through the air. The tune was a lullaby that Eileen used to sing.
Still moving slowly, he cautiously picked up the box from the table. Nothing exploded. The box was heavier than its size would indicate.

The magic in the room evaporated, suddenly. He heard Lupin banging on the door from the kitchen. The door fell open. Lupin flung himself into the room, brandishing his wand, ready to do battle, "Severus?" he demanded, "Are you..?"

Mrs. Cook was sitting with her hands folded and her eyes unfocused again. Severus gestured helplessly at the woman and then the box, not at all sure what he wanted to tell the other man, "I...it's fine." He snapped. He hastily placed the box onto his lap, and then his wand into his sleeve, wishing he was wearing wizard robes, with their abundant pockets for hiding things.

Lupin nodded tensely, but stowed his wand, as well.

The woman shook herself, "Harry, dear?" she called to the white faced boy, visible behind Lupin, "Could you put the kettle on?" She stood, as if nothing untoward had happened at all, "Now, I have a trifle in the fridge, if you lads are interested." She bustled into the kitchen to make some tea.

Lupin looked back and forth confusedly, between Severus and the kitchen. They heard Mrs. Cook chatting away at Harry, not taking any notice of the fact that Harry was staring through the kitchen door, at his guardian.

"What was that about?" demanded Lupin, in a whisper, coming to stand by Severus chair.

Severus took a deep breath, "Keep your hand on your wand." he whispered back. It was foolish to open it here, before he checked it for curses. But, only Eileen would have known about the Half Blood Prince, and only Eileen would know the significance that particular little song. He braced himself for any number of disasters, as he lifted the hinged lid.

In the box, lay a key, like a Gringott's vault key, an envelope that had Severus' name written on it in Eileen's narrow handwriting, and a golden signet ring embossed with a stylized letter P.

Severus had seen such rings before. It was the ring the heir to an old Pure Blood house might wear. The ring itself had wards on it. Old spells. However, Eileen had been a Snape when she died. The last of the Princes (his grandfather) had died not long before Eileen herself, so the ring should have come to her, and should have had an S.

Severus stared at the ring for a long moment, before the penny dropped. The last heir to the Prince line (now that Severus had claimed the boy), was a Potter.

There was absolutely no chance Severus was going to read the letter here. He closed the box, quickly.

Lupin was still standing tensely by, his hand on his sleeve, "What is it?" he hissed.

"It's fine." Severus repeated. He swallowed, "Something my mother left with her." That would be why Mrs. Cook persistently remembered the Snape house. Eileen had laid a geas on the woman, to deliver this box. In all probability, the minute they were alone in this room, "Go finish what you were doing."

Lupin nodded sharply, went back to help the boy with the dishes. Severus needed the time to pull himself together.

All these years, and he never knew that Eileen had thought to hide his inheritance from the Ministry. His breath caught in his chest and he swallowed against the bite of old anger and old grief.
"Now, Remus, sit down, dear." Mrs. Cook came in with the tea tray. Harry trailed behind her with the trifle, "Severus, are you completely worn out? You look very pale." She set out their tea cups and poured, handing them around. She then scooped out some trifle, "Will you have some?" she looked enquiringly at Severus.

He shook his head, taking his teacup in one hand. He tuned out the conversation again, holding very tightly to the blue, velvet covered box in his lap.

"Sir?" Harry spoke in a very low voice, as Remus talked to Mrs. Cook, "What happened?"

Severus shook his head.

"So, how on earth did you get malaria, Severus?" he realized the woman was addressing him.

"I..." His brain wasn't working fast enough.

"Oh, he was in Africa, doing some foreign aid work, you know," Lupin put in, carelessly. Severus decided he would have to strangle the man for the good of the Wizarding World, at some point. However, it did divert her from asking him anymore questions.

Severus wasn't much interested in trifle, but he was very grateful when Harry took his empty teacup and refilled it.
Under Layers

Chapter Summary

In which Harry reveals some truth to himself and others

Snape retired to his room, the minute they returned from Mrs. Cook's. Not surprising, considering how tired the man looked. Whatever the old woman had given the professor seemed to have shaken him.

Truthfully, the slamming door and Lupin's inability to open it left Harry feeling shaken. It had been stuck fast for less than five minutes, but those five minutes seemed like hours.

Harry had stood motionless, feeling the panic rising up from his gut, feeling utterly useless without his wand, while Lupin banged on the door and tried different unlocking hexes. Harry was overwhelmed by the harsh realization that if something happened to Snape, he'd didn't know what he'd do.

At that moment he hadn't had time to examine the thought. Now though, as he lay in his bed with Snuffles lying at his feet, he went back to it.

Before the last two weeks, Harry would never have cared what happened to Snape. Well, he supposed he'd care, but in a vague, don't-like-to-see-bad-things-happen-to-people sort of way.

This feeling, though. This was like the feeling he'd had last year when he'd seen Ginny lying still and motionless on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets. A cold, leaden knot in his stomach that threatened to rise up and strangle him.

Harry sighed and flopped over onto his side. The room was very dark. Not even a sliver of a moon showed tonight and Spinner's End had only a very few street lights. The only other light was a small night light in the bathroom that Snape said was there so they didn't break their necks in the dark. He'd put it there after the incident with the rope.

Hedwig was out for the evening. Harry had sent letters for both Ron and Hermione off with her. She'd been in a bit of a bad mood since Professor Lupin had brought Snuffles. Harry assumed she was jealous of the dog, going so far as to clack her beak threateningly, when Snuffles came too close.

With a little half smile, Harry thought that his familiars were well matched to his minders. They, like the two professors, only seemed to get along for Harry's sake. Each familiar had even picked a favorite professor.

Hedwig seemed to like Snape. On at least one occasion accepting scratches and treats from the man, with a dignified air. Lupin seemed to frighten her. It had happened tonight when the Professor came up to check on him. The owl had been sitting on the headboard, lazily preening. When Lupin had come in through the open door, she'd fluffed herself up and rather than her usual hoot, she made an alarmed, "Krek, krek, krek" noise. Lupin was careful to stay a good distance away from her.

On the other hand, Snuffles seemed to think it was possible that he'd need to protect Harry from
Snape. He kept a very close eye on the man, never aggressive, but very wary. The professor was aware of it and was careful around Snuffles, always taking care to never look the dog in the eye, raise his voice, or move a hand too quickly near either Harry or the animal. Harry had heard Aunt Marge telling Dudley that those were things to be avoided around unfriendly dogs. The dog much preferred Lupin, but that was probably because the man liked to give Snuffles treats.

Now that he thought about it, though, maybe Snape was just being careful of Harry. In fact, both the men were treating Harry as if he were fragile.

As much as Harry hated to admit it, he felt fragile. If one of the teacher's voices even edged toward being a little stern, Harry could feel a lump in his throat and a flutter of panic in his chest.

Harry rolled over to his other side, unable to get comfortable. Snuffles whined a little and laid his heavy head on the boy's hip. The dog's weight was calming, helping him feel more centered, less likely to lose it emotionally.

The other bedroom door opened and closed. He heard Snape's slow footsteps in the hallway. Harry hadn't been allowed to close his door since the whole hanging thing, so he could hear every sound in the house, it seemed.

The bathroom door opened, shut. The toilet flushed and the bathroom door opened again. Rather than heading back to Snape's room, the footsteps came into his room. The boy decided he wasn't going to chance getting into another conversation with the man, so he just closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

Snape pulled the chair over and sat in it. For a long time, the potion's master just sat there. It was getting a bit creepy to be stared at like this, it seemed to be a habit with the Professor. He just couldn't stop looking at Harry like he was some kind of bug.

Snape sighed. Harry nearly jumped at the sound, so loud it seemed, in the quiet room. "Harry, I'm so sorry." he whispered, so softly that Harry was almost sure he must be imagining it, "I swear..." Snape broke off. Sighed again.

Snuffles shifted restlessly, picking his head up.

"Yes, yes." Muttered Snape, "I won't wake your master. Stupid dog." The last was said with no rancor at all, the tone of his voice calming and gentle. Almost fond, "Bloody thing. If you weren't so good for the child, I wouldn't give you house room."

Harry heard the man stand up. Snuffle's head came back down to rest on Harry's hip. Then, the man did the strangest thing; Snape gently pulled the blankets up so they covered Harry's shoulders. Snuffles head went up again. Harry could feel the dog stiffen, but at least he didn't growl.

The child was hard pressed to lie still, realizing with some astonishment that the man was tucking him in. Done with that, his hand brushed the hair out of Harry's eyes, reminding Harry of how Snape had played the part of the Storyteller the other night.

Without saying anything else, the wizard slowly made his way back to his own room. The bedroom door opened and shut.

Harry wasn't at all sure what to make of that. Something about the gesture made Harry feel...he wasn't sure what. It was such on oddly affectionate thing to do. Everything else Snape had done for Harry was done out of the man's sense of Duty, to help keep him calm, or because he was ill. Those
things made sense.

This time, though...this time Snape seemed to be tucking Harry in the same way Mrs Weasley had tucked Ron and him in last summer. Because Ron would always tell his mum he was too old to be fussed over, she'd give him a quick peck on the cheek before bed. About an hour after that, long after Ron was asleep, Mrs. Weasley would sneak in and tuck them in. Sometimes she'd stand and stare at them first. It was odd enough that Harry had actually asked Ron about it. He'd shrugged and said that his mum always said she felt like she wanted to make sure they were all still breathing.

Harry wondered if it were just something parents did, then. He wouldn't know.

It was odd that Snape should do it, too

Harry spent a long time staring into the darkened room, grateful for the little light in the hallway.

The next day or two were quiet, as the three of them fell into a kind of routine. Harry and Lupin generally got up and made breakfast. Lupin would attempt to engage Harry in conversation and Harry would give the shortest answers he could, then he'd escape. To read Tales of Beadle the Bard, or maybe write letters, or else just sit with Snuffles and stare at the wall.

Around lunchtime, Snape would come down, eat something, spend an hour glaring at Lupin, and then go back to bed. He'd repeat it at dinnertime, except he'd sit with them for an hour or two in the living room, watching the television.

Clearly, Snape understood that the television was the best way to avoid conversation with people who had to live in the same house. Harry always preferred it, when the Dursleys were immersed in the thing. Although, it perhaps didn't work as well as Snape hoped. The man seemed to like police shows, and Lupin kept asking Snape to explain things.

After a day, Harry thought he had regained his knack of getting adults to forget his existence.

Not all the way, sadly. Lupin sometimes sent Harry outside by himself, to walk Snuffles. Mostly, he came with them. Being outside was less oppressive to Harry. It was easier to stop listening to Lupin when they were outside. For the most part, Harry just tuned him out, answering the man's questions in grunts and monosyllables, feeling like nothing was very real.

Very likely, he could have gone on like this indefinitely, except that the professors apparently grew tired of his lack of communication.

After dinner, about ten days after...the event...(Harry still couldn't name it to himself), Professor Lupin stopped Harry, before he could flee back to his room.

"Harry?" the man said, "I wonder if we could talk?" he beckoned Harry to sit back down at the table.

Professor Snape was sat drinking tea at the table. He still looked worn, but he seemed a little brighter today. He'd gotten up for breakfast and it looked as if he intended to stay up for the afternoon. He and Lupin had had some sort of little conference in the sitting room that morning.

Snape had some awareness of the acoustics of the house, because Harry had heard him hiss, "Not in here," when Lupin had tried to speak to the man in the kitchen.

Obediently, the boy sat down. He folded his hands in front of him on the table, looked at his interlaced fingers, rather than Lupin or Snape. He wondered, distantly, if the two men were finally going to tell him that he was far too much trouble to have around. Conversations that began with
"We need to talk." were generally ones that would end badly for Harry.

That impression was reinforced when Professor Snape slid a cup of tea that had a slightly sock-like odor in front of him.

The child unclenched his hands and wrapped them around the mug of tea, instead. He glanced up at the man's black eyes as he sat across from him.

Snape must have done his mind reading thing again. He sighed and said, "Don't look like that, Harry. We're not planning on doing anything dire, and we're not sending you anywhere."

Lupin pulled a chair around, so he sat at the end of the table, "No, of course not." He agreed, "I just wanted to talk about a few things I recovered from your Aunt and Uncle's house."

Harry quickly took a sip of the sock flavored tea. There was a slightly bitter taste to it today, that the milk and sugar couldn't quite cover up. He felt his hands relax and his heart slow, "All right." he said, quietly. There was a real advantage to being the ward of a potions master, Harry thought. The potions that Snape kept giving him helped him sleep through the night, without waking up in cold sweat. Now, the calming draught he'd spiked Harry's tea with was welcome. It would help getting through what would otherwise be a nerve wracking conversation.

Lupin produced a plain manila file folder, like Muggles used. He opened it. Inside were several photographs, Lupin handed Harry the top one.

It was a picture of the inside of a tiny cupboard, cleaning supplies on shelves on the back wall. A bare electric light bulb illuminated the place. A dirty, crib sized mattress lay on the floor, with a blanket folded up on top of it. The only motion in the picture was a spider crawling across the bare floor and another crawling on the tacked up paper that read "Harry's Room". A few broken toys were neatly stacked on the milk crate beside the mattress.

Harry's heart would have lurched if it wasn't for the calming draught.

"Could you tell me about this Harry?" Lupin asked, softly.

"What's to tell?" Harry asked, dully, "That's where I lived until I got my Hogwart's letters. Uncle Vernon was afraid the wizards were watching us." He laughed; a short, harsh, mirthless sound, "Of course, they weren't. Or else they didn't care about it."

He dared a glance at the two men. Lupin had a worried frown. Snape wore the look Harry recognized. It was the look he'd worn when he'd caught Harry and Ron sneaking in the castle after they'd borrowed Ron's dad's car last year. His face was white, his lips pressed together.

"This is where you lived?" He hissed in a low, dangerous voice.

Harry stared at him, "I told you that." he said, a little defensively, "A freak like me needs to be locked up." he stopped. He hadn't meant to say that last bit.

"You do realize how inappropriate that was, don't you?" Lupin put a restraining hand on Snape's wrist, but looked at Harry.

"What was inappropriate about it?" asked Harry, unable, for some reason, to give his usual shrug, and the expected answer, "It's not like they wanted me there."

"How often were you locked in?" Snape asked, in a deadly calm voice.
"Every day, pretty much." Harry shrugged now. Distantly, some part of his brain was yelling shutupshutupSHUTUP! It didn't seem important at the moment, however, "I told you that. If I wasn't at school, or they didn't want me doing something for them." he paused, reflectively, "Sometimes they let me have my school books. The teachers called them, if I wasn't able to do my homework for too many days. If I had them, I had something to do."

Harry sipped his tea some more, trying to remember where he'd tasted the bitterness before. Both the professors were looking ill.

Lupin bravely soldiered on. He pulled out another photograph, "Will you tell me about this one?"

This one was a picture of a door, with seven locks on the outside, "That's Dudley's second bedroom." Harry replied. He'd never thought of it as his room, even when all the broken Dudley junk had been carted off to the tip, "I've slept there the past two summers."

"Why the locks?" asked Lupin.

Harry couldn't believe the man had to ask, "Well, to keep me in. To stop me from being a nuisance."

"What were their complaints?" Snape asked, in that hiss.

Harry smiled a little, "About the same as yours, Professor." Oh god, why had he said that? "I'm an arrogant little bastard, who thinks I'm better than everyone else. I'm not good for anything, I'll never amount to anything and it would be better for everyone if I just cut my throat. I tried once, but it hurts a lot." he added, conversationally. The distant voice in his head was still telling him to shut up. He would have stopped talking all together, if he could have, "I suppose you didn't want me to actually kill myself, while I was here, did you?" Harry couldn't seem to stop every stray thought in his head from coming out of his mouth, "I can wait until we get back to school...The Astronomy Tower is pretty high. Or, maybe I'll just make it look like an accident...You know, a fall from my broom."

Harry didn't realize, until he said it, that he'd been thinking of that all term.

The two men stared at him.

He laughed, bitterly, the two Professors jumped, "You said I've got a death wish, Professor. You're pretty much spot on about that. I wish the Basilisk had gotten me, last year. At least then, people would have said nice things about me, when I was dead." he smiled a little, "I told Hermione that the Dursleys would be disappointed that I hadn't managed to get myself killed."

Lupin stirred, "Harry, you know that what the Dursleys said and did was abuse?"

The "A word" again.

"Well, yeah, if I'd been normal, I guess." Harry replied quietly, "I mean, its not like they can hurt me, really, is it?"

"What do you mean?" Snape asked curiously.

"Just that..." Again, Harry was surprised they would actually have to ask, "I can take it. You know? I mean, things just don't hurt me as much as they would someone normal."

Snape's expression had gone blank, after a moment he said, "I assure you, Harry, wizards may heal more quickly than Muggles and we may be a bit more durable, but we feel pain quite as acutely as they."
Harry scoffed, "Don't be stupid." The voice of his better sense gave up telling him to shut up. Instead, it told him that calling Snape stupid would certainly grant his death wish, "I'm even a freak of a wizard. No one else ever survived a Killing Curse. I wish..." he trailed off, suddenly feeling much less foggy than he had been feeling for days. With the ebbing of the numbness, a sharp pain seemed to lance through him. Physical or emotional, he couldn't tell, but his heart hurt.

"What do you wish?" asked Snape, again in that weird, gentle way.

Harry looked down at his tea cup, surprised that it was empty. He swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat, "I just wish that I could be normal. I wish my parents hadn't died. I wish that I could figure out how to stop being such a fuck up. I wish I'd never heard of The Boy Who Lived." the lump spilled over. Tears started down his cheeks.

Fortunately, it didn't seem like his lunch was about to make a reappearance.

Lupin and Snape glanced at each other, while Harry swiped irritably at his face.

"How...ah...how often did you go without meals?" asked Lupin, after a moment.

"Not that often." said Harry, happy to talk about something else, "Just, you know, once or twice a week."

"Molly Weasley said that the twins told her, they were starving you." The frown line between the professor's eyebrows got deeper.

"Oh, you know the twins." Harry replied, "They were exaggerating."

Snape and Lupin both seemed to relax a bit, so Harry went on, "I got a can of soup every day." he stopped, thinking about it, "Maybe, not every day. Most days."

He yawned, "Sorry, tired." he muttered, "Don't know why..." The bit of Harry's brain that had been telling him to shut up suddenly caught on. He looked up at Snape, "You gave me something, didn't you?" he said it without heat, because nothing much seemed that important, at the moment, "Why did you do that?"

Lupin looked guilty, but Snape nodded soberly, "I thought it would be beneficial to get some reliable information out of you. You haven't spoken two words put together, to either of us, in days."

"You really are a bastard, aren't you?" Harry said, irritably, not able to really get angry.

Snape smirked, "I'll let the language and the disrespect go, for now. I am well aware that this particular potion removes one's internal censor. I promise you, I won't be so lenient any other time."

At that, Harry felt compelled to continue, "Yeah, but you're the only one who's ever kept their promises. I...appreciate that. I never had anyone sit with me when I was sick, or let me pick what I wanted to eat, or get me clothes. You're a bastard, but...well, you've done more for me than anyone else." Now that Harry was on the subject, he started rattling on some more, "I used to think that Dumbledore liked me. A bit, anyway. But, I don't think he'd've sent me back if he did. Fudge said that Dumbledore said I had to go back."

"You mean the night you blew up your aunt?" asked Lupin. He was white knuckling his tea mug, now. Harry thought he ought to ask Snape for a calming draught, "Tell me, what happened that night?"

Harry shrugged, "Everyone already knows. What's the point?"
"I know that you ran away from home, and you were taken back." Snape's voice had gone back to its usual acerbic tone, "I don't know in detail what happened next."

"You saw." Muttered Harry. Then, the urge to keep talking overwhelmed him again, "Uncle Vernon backhanded me, after Fudge left. Aunt Marge didn't have a proper cane, so she found a bit of curtain rod, I think. Showed Uncle Vernon how to use it."

"Curtain rod?" Snape asked. Both men looked aghast.

"Oh, not the big rods that hold up the heavy curtains." Harry hastened to explain, "Just one of those ones that hold up the little lacy curtains in the kitchen. They're made of plastic and they have some bend in them. Aunt Marge broke the one on me. Uncle Vernon used his belt that night. Mrs. Figg saw the bruise he left on my face, the next day. He went and found a proper cane after that."

Lupin swallowed, "How often?" he asked, sounding perfectly calm, but his jaw was taut and Harry thought he saw something a gleam of something hard and sharp in his eyes.

"Just once a day. Usually." It was so tiring, all this questioning. Harry put his elbows on the table and leaned his head on his hands. "I assure you, the headmaster knew nothing about your Uncle's treatment of you." Snape said, seriously.

Harry wanted to scoff, but Snape hadn't lied to him yet, "You think?" he asked, in a small voice. The lump was back, "I just reckoned that he was tired of my fuck ups. And, Fudge did tell them I needed it."

"Harry," Lupin seemed a little exasperated, "I don't think Fudge meant it the way your uncle interpreted it, at all. I think he'd be horrified at how you were treated."

"But, I told Shacklebolt that my Uncle was going to beat the hell out of me. He was really nice, but he said Dumbledore..."

Snape growled, low in his throat, so Harry stopped talking. Lupin gave the man a warning look. "How often did they feed you?" Snape was staring at him, again.

Again, the change of topic was a relief, "Hmm...most days?"

"Ah. Perhaps I should ask, what did they feed you?" Snape snapped.

"Tea and toast, mostly. Some days the tea was still warm. See, Fudge told them I had too much energy. They reckoned I was eating too much. Sometimes, Aunt Petunia gave me a sandwich, though. She'd leave it for me in my room. She's done that before, when I was on punishment, you see. Sometimes, I had sandwiches waiting for me in my cupboard."

Lupin and Snape gave each other a sharp glance, "You saw her leave the food?" Lupin pressed him.

Harry shook his head. Weary beyond belief, he put his head down on the table, on his folded arms, "Tired." he repeated, feeling a pleasant weariness weighing his limbs down.

"That's all we're likely to get out of him, today." Snape's voice said. A hand gently stroked his hair. "Severus!" Lupin's voice was a harsh whisper, "Did you use that truth potion on him?"

"Don't be a fool. Of course, I did." Snape whispered back.
They must have moved a little ways away. Harry heard them speaking in normal voices in the hallway. Curious, he fought back the wave of sleepiness, to listen to their conversation.

"We'll be lucky if he ever trusts us again." Lupin sounded furious, "You shouldn't have done that without telling me, at least."

"You haven't had any luck in getting him talking, have you?" Snape demanded.

"You had no right..."

"I had every right, I'm the boy's fa-" Snape broke off, suddenly. He started again, in a quieter, less angry voice, "The child is my responsibility. I refuse to watch him self destruct. I will get him through this, no matter what it takes."

Hearing that gave Harry a strangely warm feeling in his chest. At the moment, he couldn't even find it in him to be angry about the truth potion.

He heard Lupin sigh, "Yes, all right. But, you do see my point now, don't you?"

"Yes, Lupin. Tell Molly and Arthur that we'll visit them over Halloween." Snape sounded resigned, "Clearly, we can't do without help while you're...away."

Harry turned that around in his head, wondering where Lupin would be going. He decided he wasn't all that interested and drifted further to sleep.

Sometime later, Harry felt a tingle of magic across his skin, then himself being picked up, with an arm under his knees and another under his shoulders, to be cradled against someone's chest.

"Severus? I really think you should let me do that." Lupin was saying, very softly.

"Don't be ridiculous." Snape replied, just as softly, "I made him quite light enough."

The magic Harry felt must have been a hover charm or featherlight charm. He couldn't summon the energy to care, really. He was still so tired. He snuggled into the chest of the person holding him.

"Shhh. Go back to sleep. You're fine." Snape's voice rumbled against Harry's cheek. Snape was holding him and he felt the man's unsteady gait as he climbed the stairs.

A soft hoot greeted them as Snape lay Harry down on his bed, "Hello, Hedwig. Quiet now. Your master is in need of his sleep." Snape said, "You too, ridiculous animal."

Harry felt Snuffles jump onto the bed. Then, Harry's jeans and sweatshirt became abruptly softer and looser. Snape had used a switching spell to replace them with his pajamas.

The last thing Harry heard that night was the scrape and creak of the chair, telling him that Snape had sat down in it, again.
Yet another morning found Severus waking feeling as though he hadn't slept at all. After another night had been filled with dreams of the dead.

Last night had been different, though. Instead of talking to the menagerie of unquiet spirits that insisted on occupying his dreams, he had been searching for Eileen. Every time he’d thought he’d caught up with her, she'd leave through a different door. He was always two steps behind her.

He assumed it had something to do with the owls he was waiting to arrive. Waiting for owls from Switzerland was damned annoying. If it was a Muggle bank, he could have used the bloody phone.

In the meantime, Severus had more immediate troubles. He couldn't quite put his finger on what had woken him at first, but then he realized the stealthy sounds were Harry, moving around in the next room.

Severus picked up the fob watch from next to his wand and looked at the dial. Nowhere near either Mischief or Mortal Peril. That was a relief.

It was very early, not yet light. He considered going back to sleep, but he'd had enough sleep in the past month to last the next year, he thought. Instead he lay, listening the boy's early morning routine. Harry appeared to have all three types of insomnia; he fell asleep late, woke up early and slept badly in between. That would explain the amount of after-hours wandering he'd done in the last two years at school.

He heard drawers opening and shutting, footsteps down the hall. The bathroom door opened and shut, and, after a moment, opened and shut again. Then, his son's footsteps down the stairs.

Merlin, where had that come from? Apparently, his subconscious was out to get him. Every night, Lily or James told him that he had the responsibility of caring for him. That the boy was his, Severus' son. Not just in blood, but in spirit, as well.

Severus sat up and hung his feet over the edge of the bed. Lying here in the dark, ruminating on what his dreams meant, wasn't going to get him anywhere. It was time to face the child.

Severus pulled on his dressing gown and slippers. The heat hadn't come on yet, and it was a bit chilly. A wave of his wand put a warming charm on his dressing gown.

He stopped at the top of the stairs. As usual, he could hear every word and sound from the kitchen. The pots and pans were rattling rather more loudly than usual.

"Not letting them cook for me again. I'm not trusting them as far as I can throw them." The child was saying resentfully. A slam followed, "Bloody git. And Lupin! He's worse. At least if Snape is a bastard, it's because he's always a bastard. I'm telling you, I have half a mind to pack up and..." he broke off. The dog whined.

"No Snuffles, get out of it. That's not your breakfast." He went on in a depressed voice. Another thump, "Well, it's not like I have anywhere to go."

This is going to be enjoyable, thought Severus, sarcastically.

The creaky fifth step announced the Professor's presence. The thumping and rattling in the kitchen stopped for a moment, then began again. The sound of running water and the peculiar little “poof” of
the gas burner being turned on announced that the child had put the kettle on.

When Severus came into the kitchen, the boy was stood with his back to the room, cracking eggs into the pan.

"There'll be tea in a minute." Harry gritted.

The dog that was sitting beside his master, waiting hopefully for something to drop, looked at Snape and growled, low in his throat.

"Quiet, Snuffles." Snapped the boy. He really was out of sorts, if he was snapping at the dog.

Good.

That was much better than the apathy of the past few days. Severus had been afraid they were going to lose the child to his shock. It was rare, but wizards were capable of willing their own death. Longbottom's death had been largely a result of that, or so the autopsy had found. His magic had just stopped healing him, leaving him no more resilient than the average Muggle child.

Harry said nothing else. With the efficiency of long practice, he made the tea and cooked the breakfast. The pans rattling only a little as he worked.

He put the breakfast on the table quietly. Admirable restraint, considering Severus was sure he could hear the boy grinding his teeth.

They ate in silence. Severus did not feel like making the first move. Anyway, it appeared unnecessary. The boy was practically chewing his tongue to keep whatever he was thinking behind his teeth.

When they had finished, Harry cleared up the plates, clattering them into the sink. Turning his back, he hissed, "You drugged me."

"Don't be so melodramatic." Sighed Severus "It was a mild truth potion. Perfectly legal for use in children. You said nothing that you truly didn't want others to know."

For a minute, the child didn't say anything. He seemed absorbed in washing the dishes, but his body was tense and his movements sharp.

"Why would I want to talk about...about that?" He finally asked, his voice low and furious.

"That?" Severus prompted, gently.

"The Dursleys. How they were...How they kept me in...in..." Harry's voice trailed off, then he made a movement as though steeling himself. When he began again, Severus had to lean forward to hear the whisper, "Why would I want to talk about being locked up in a cupboard?"

Severus chose his words carefully, not wanting to cause him to either blow up or shut down again, "You have been making reference to that cupboard since I examined you. Whether you admit it or not, you do want people to know." He spoke in that coaxing voice he often found himself using on Harry these days.

"There's nothing to talk about." Harry said, softly. He'd stopped washing the dishes. He leaned on his elbows, which rested on the edge of the sink, bowed his head, covering his face with his hands.

Severus felt the pressure of magic building up in the kitchen. The boy's wand growing warm in his
pocket, next to his own. Severus realized that the young wizard hadn't once asked for his wand to be
returned. Another symptom of his depression, Severus supposed.

Prompted by that inner urging that spoke with Lily's voice, Severus stood, walked closer to the boy.
Cautiously, he put one hand Harry's shoulder.

Predictably, Harry flinched away from the hand. No wonder Hagrid was so close to the child;
dealing with Harry was a bit like handling one of the gamekeeper's baby monsters.

Severus examined that thought, realizing that it was an apt comparison. All the behavior he'd been
taking as defiant and arrogant for the last two years, and what the other teachers had been seeing as
proof that the boy took after James, came into focus. The child was almost feral. If he went his own
way, it was because there was no one to tell him different.

He reached out again, very slowly, keeping in mind the analogy. The shoulder trembled under his
hand. The magic moving about the room began to rattle the dishes in the cupboard and on the
shelves. The professor gently turned the child around.

Harry's eyes were tearless, although very red. He stared up at the adult wizard with an unreadable,
frighteningly impassive expression.

"It doesn't matter." he said, dully, "It's not like I'm a normal person." His green eyes were flat, with
deep circles under them

Severus wondered if that truth potion could still be active. No, even in double doses, it would only
last an hour. Therefore, as he had hoped, that little bit of truth from last night had opened some kind
of gate. He'd seen it in students before, and he remembered well, how it had felt. After he had joined
Dumbledore, Poppy had been the one to make him face truths about his own life. She'd
recommended he see an actual mind healer, but he could never bear to.

"You are a perfectly normal wizard child." Severus told Harry sternly, "I want you to stop saying
that."

The magic moving about the room spiked. The mugs on the draining board shattered, "WHY?"
Harry shouted back, "It's what everybody thinks!" He backed up quickly, stumbling over the dog,
who was behind him. Belying his claim of being clumsy, Harry recovered quickly. He skipped back
two steps, until he met the wall. He set his back against the back door, looking cornered.

"Sorry." Harry whispered, looking at the shattered crockery. He was, again, disproportionately
stricken over the bout of accidental magic. He'd gone that pale color that presaged one of his panic
attacks. His trembling became pronounced.

Severus frowned, "Perhaps it would be better if you picked that up." Hoping that distraction would
head it off.

Harry lifted his eyes to meet Severus' gaze, biting his lip. He moved toward Severus slowly, his right
hand half raised, palm out between them, ready to protect his face. Internally, Severus sighed, they
were going to have to get over this.

Impatiently, Severus reached into the pocket of his robe. Harry froze, his eyes wide, that hand going
up, expecting Severus to cast something deeply unpleasant on him.

"I think it would be better if you used your wand for that." More slowly, the professor drew it from
the pocket where he kept it next to his own, holding it out to the boy.
Harry reached out his shaking hand, looking furtively from beneath his fringe, "But...I'm not supposed to use magic outside of school." he said shakily, when he wrapped his hand around the handle of the wand.

"I think, in this particular instance, you'd better off if you did."

"Sorry?" the child's eyes narrowed, expecting a trick, "I got a warning last year, for using a hover charm that I didn't even cast."

"Yes, so clearly it's not as though the Ministry can tell who's doing the casting." Returned Severus, "I just feel that your magic might be better behaved if you direct it, rather than trying to suppress it, as you have been."

"I...oh." Harry blinked, "Erm..." he gave a tentative little wave of the wand and muttered, "Reparo." Obediently, the crockery returned to its normal state. Magic stopped moving so tensely through the room, looking for an outlet.

"Harry, come sit down. Please." Severus took his own chair back.

The young wizard stood there, staring at his teacher, then he shook himself and came to sit back at the table, "I suppose you want my wand back." He said, sounding defeated.

Severus refused to allow the child to sink into his apathy again, "No. Actually, I think it would be a good thing if it were returned to you. I just need you to promise me something.

The wariness came back into the boy's face, "What?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I..." The potion master hesitated, unconsciously squeezing his left forearm with his other hand, "I need you to swear to me that you'll come to me, before you ever do something like you did the other night." he stared straight into the Gryffindor's eyes, a little Legillimency would ensure he'd know the truth or falsehood of the boy's next words.

"I already told Lupin" Harry whispered, "I won't...won't do anything stupid, while I'm here." His eyes were still fey and flat.

Harry hadn't answered the question, but that was no matter. Severus incanted Legilimens silently; a quick dip into the boy's mind, just enough to take in the surface images.

The Astronomy Tower still figured prominently, but it seemed that, for the moment, the child wasn't planning on doing injury to himself.

"Fair enough." Severus grunted. He'd take what he could get. Now, he was at a complete loss as to where to go next with the conversation, but he knew, now that he had gotten Harry speaking, that there were some things they had to discuss.

Harry didn't need to be drawn out that much, fortunately, "Why do you care?" he asked, softly.

"Care about what?" Severus asked, in a neutral tone.

"About the Dursleys. Nobody else ever has." He dropped his eyes back to his hands. They were laced together so tightly that Severus could see the knuckles turning white. The thumbnail of the right hand was digging into the left, a gesture that was habitual, if the new scratches Severus could see at the base of the boy's thumb were anything to go by.

Gently, Severus reached across the table to put both of his hands on the boy's. That made Harry look
up. Severus carefully pulled the hands apart, pushed them to lie palm down on the table, with his
own covering them, "I care, because it is my job to care." He held the boy's gaze while he said this.

You can do this, said the voice in Severus' head that sounded like Lily.

Severus took a long breath, hoping that his carefully planned speech would work as he wanted it to,
"I...must confess to you..." he hesitated.

Lupin had told Severus, "Just tell him. It will be much worse if he finds out on his own."

Severus didn't believe it was that simple. He opted for a carefully edited version of the truth, "Your
mother...before she died, she knew that she and her husband were being...targeted...by the Dark
Lord."

Harry stared at him, confusion written all over his face, not sure what that had to do with anything,
but too startled to pull his hands away.

"She asked me to look after you, if something should happen to her."

Harry didn't move, except to clench his hands into fists.

"Your mother's Muggle solicitor informs me that I was named as your guardian in her will that she
left with him." That much was true. The letter that Severus had shown Lupin two months ago had
been from Lily, asking him to look after Harry. What he hadn't shown Lupin was the business card
of Lily's solicitor. A solicitor who had sent the details of Harry's Muggle trust and a copy of the
assignment of parental responsibility naming Severus. One of the school owls had brought it to
Spinner's End, two days after their dinner with Mrs. Cook.

Severus had written to inform the solicitor that Harry's circumstances had changed, back in
September. The solicitor had replied with a note explaining that he'd tried to find Severus after Lily
and James' death, since he was officially named the child's guardian in Lily's will. The solicitor had
assumed that Severus had made informal agreement with Petunia, saying it had seemed quite the
normal thing, given that Severus had been a single man without other children. In the Muggle world,
Severus had always had legal authority over Harry's welfare.

The former Death-Eater-turned-spy didn't know what to make of that. He just knew that he hadn't
felt this weight of guilt since he'd held Lily's lifeless body in his arms.

That was a bitter memory. For the first time in many years, last night, Severus had picked the
memory out of the jar he kept it in. He'd viewed it in a Pensieve soon after Lily's death, so that he
would only remember it second hand, the way one remembered a film. The true memory, with its
attendant emotions, he kept bottled up, in case he should ever need it. Last night, He'd taken the
memory back into his own mind.

He remembered now. He remembered, far too clearly: he had ignored the squalling child in the crib.
His squalling child. And, why? At the time, he had only seen the child as the mechanism for Lily's
death. Severus had lifted Lily's cooling body and sat up against the one remaining wall with her head
in his lap.

Only moments later, Hagrid had turned up. He hadn't spoken to Severus, merely patted him on the
shoulder in rough sympathy. Hagrid had always understood Severus better than most. Words would
have only thrown him into a rage.

The enormous man had picked up the baby. He had been almost able to hold Harry in one hand.
Severus had heard Hagrid speaking in soft tones, "What's that on yer forehead, then? Poor, little
As Hagrid was leaving, he said, "Dumbledore'll be here in a minute." He said over the wails of the child, "Will you..." Hagrid sobbed once, then forced it back down, wiping his face in the shoulder of his coat, since his hands were full, "Will yer stay with 'er? 'Till 'e gets 'ere?"

Severus had nodded vacantly. For the moment, he had been out of tears.

That was the point he should have told Hagrid that Lily had wanted him to take Harry. That was when he should have told Dumbledore about his relationship to Harry.

But, he hadn't.

In the eyes of the Wizengamot, a Muggle document would not have trumped Petunia's blood rights. Especially with Dumbledore making the recommendation that Harry go to his blood family.

But, Severus being the boy's biological father would have. He decided he didn't need to tell Harry those details.

The child was staring at him out of baffled green eyes, "So, what does that mean?" the question bringing Severus back to the present.

"It means that...I..." Severus faltered, a lump in his throat, "The...ahh...reason I could change your guardianship without Ministry involvement was that I had always had the right to do so."

Harry withdrew his hands and Severus let him.

"So...you sent me to live with the Dursleys?" he whispered. His breathing was rapid again. Another incipient panic attack

Severus wanted to offer the boy a calming draught, but he was sure, after last night, he wouldn't take it, "No. That was indeed Dumbledore. And, like the rest of the Wizarding World, I placed too much trust in blood."

"But...why didn't anyone...?" the child whispered.

"Check on you?" Severus finished the thought for him, "Frankly, because Petunia asked us not to. One of her conditions for taking you were that we not bother her. And...and Lily had loved Petunia. I never entertained the thought that her love was undeserved. Or, that someone could change that radically. Your grandparents were always kind people...I never thought a daughter of theirs was capable..." Over the last few days, Severus had come to the conclusion that Petunia didn't consider Wizards quite human. She must have justified her treatment of Harry by telling herself that he didn't have feelings as acute as a normal boy.

"You bastard." Harry said it quietly. His shaking had increased and he picked up the wand from where he'd laid it on the table.

Severus sincerely hoped the child didn't hex him. He'd have to give consequences for that. He could overlook the language, under the circumstances, but...

The Lily-voice in his head told him to get his head out of his arse.

The boy stood, put the wand in his back pocket. His green eyes were vivid against his pale cheeks. The mugs shattered again, along with the dishes in the cupboard.
The dog, whom Severus had forgotten about, whined, nosing at the child's hand.

"You treated me like shite for two years." Harry ignored the dog. He planted his feet and clenched his fists, ready for a fight, "You let Dumbledore send me back to the Dursleys. You haven't given a damn about me, all this time. What's different now?" for all that the boy's body was shaking with anger, his voice was still low.

The kettle started whistling. Severus pulled out his wand and shut the noise up. He cast a quick magic cancellation spell and the kitchen became silent. If he and Harry were going to be here long, Severus would have to ask Molly about a permanent accidental magic dampening spell.

"You want to know how the Dursleys treated me?" Harry snapped, not taking any notice of Severus' wand, "I didn't know my own name until I went to school. I thought my name was Freak. Or Whelp. Or Boy. Petunia only ever called me Harry when she had to put on a show for someone. Everyone thought the Dursleys were so bloody respectable! They used to tell people I was mental. That was why they always left me with Mrs. Fig when they went on holiday. Or when they took Dudley anywhere."

At least he was talking, thought Severus wryly. He wasn't sure he wan't to deal with all of Harry's anger, but he'd been the one to let the djinn out of the bottle.

"They told me my father was a drunk and my mother was a slag. They locked me up, most of the time in the dark. They hit me if I cried, or talked too loud, or burnt the breakfast, or did better at school than Dudley or BREATHED WRONG!" Harry's voice started to rise towards a shout, "Everyone thought it was all right the night the Minister took me back. He TOLD THEM I needed to be taken in hand. He said that the Dursleys had been doing the RIGHT THING. HE TOLD THEM DUMBLEDORE RECKONED THE DURSLEYS DID A GOOD JOB WITH ME." he paused for breath, "I TOLD HIM THEY WERE GOING TO BEAT THE SHITE OUT OF ME. HE TOLD ME NOT TO EXAGGERATE." the boy was panting, nearly hyperventilating now, "AND THEN NEVILLE DIES AND EVERYONE'S ALL FREAKED OUT. AND IT DOESN'T CHANGE ANYTHING. AND NEVILLE'S STILL..."

At the mention of Longbottom, Harry's anger crumbled. His shouting trailed off into sobs. He covered his face with his hands, "I wish it were me, instead." he sounded furious, even through his crying.

Severus stood, unsure whether he should go to the child, or not. His problem was solved when Harry fled past him, thumping up the stairs, the dog in tow.

"That went well." Muttered Severus to himself.

He knew he dare not leave the child for too long. He put the fob watch on the table, so he could keep an eye on it, and fortified himself with a cup of tea.
Chapter 47

Harry fled up the stairs to his room, almost screaming in frustration when he found himself unable to slam the door that was held open with a spell.

Hedwig flapped her wings and hooted in alarm, as the headboard she was perched on shook with the force of Harry's magic. The chair tipped over and the window cracked.

Since slamming the door was unsuccessful, the boy balled his fist and slammed it into the plaster beside the door frame, leaving the plaster dented. It felt so good to lash out at something, that Harry did it again. After the third or fourth time, his knuckles came away bloody, leaving stains on the wall. If it hurt, he couldn't tell.

Snuffles tugged and pulled at his master's sweatshirt with his teeth. When that did nothing, he began barking, frantically. Harry dimly registered that the dog had fled, yelping and barking down the stairs.

"Harry! Stop!"

The distraught child ignored the voice, slamming his hand into the wall, again. Two arms wrapped themselves around him, pulling him back away from the wall.

"Let me go!" roared Harry, kicking backwards. Hedwig screeched and flew at the man who had wrapped her master in a bear hug, pinning his arms.

"Aah!" It was Lupin. Surprisingly, Lupin still held on, even as Harry continued to struggle and Hedwig swooped around the room for another pass.

The dog's barking added to the chaos. Harry found himself with his feet off the ground, kicking to get free. Snuffles barked at both Hedwig and the professor. The owl screamed and dove at them again, scoring another hit, if Lupin's cry meant anything.

"Hedwig! I'm not trying to...ahh!"


Hedwig stopped flying at Lupin. She flew twice around the room before evidently deciding to trust the dark man. She settled down onto the headboard again, fluffed up and wary.

Harry stopped struggling, falling limp and looking at the floor, his breathing harsh and rapid.

Snuffles had stopped barking, but he stood tensely, with his hackles up.

"Snuffles!" Lupin said sharply. The dog sat.

The arms holding Harry loosened. With an inarticulate cry, the child threw himself against the wall, turning to face the professors.

Lupin's face had a gash from Hedwig's talon, narrowly missing his eye. It was a long cut, that was bleeding freely. The man was dressed in a set of grey pajamas. Apparently he'd only just woken and his pajama shirt was covered in blood.

Ignoring the man bleeding beside him, Snape said softly, "Harry. You've hurt yourself."
The boy looked down stupidly at the fist he'd been slamming into the wall. It was swollen, the knuckles scraped and bloody. He supposed it was going to start hurting in a minute.

Snape took a cautious step towards Harry, "Let me see." He extended his hand, palm up.

Harry tried to step back, but the wall was there. He slid along the wall until he was in the corner, "Leave me alone." His voice sounded high pitched and not like his own.

Snape stopped; Harry couldn't read his expression. He looked at the other wizard who'd just stopped him from mangling his hand further.

Lupin had pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and was pressing it to his face, trying to staunch the blood. Harry stared, shaking all over. All he could think was that Uncle Vernon would have killed Hedwig for that, "I'm sorry," he whispered, desperately. He closed his eyes, unwillingly picturing Vernon in his mind.

"Ungrateful Whelp! When I get my hands on that bloody bird..."

It was as if he were back on Privet Drive. He pressed his back further into the wall, as if he could find shelter there. Vividly he remembered Vernon threatening his owl after the Minister sent him back that summer "Uncle Vernon...please...I sent her away. I won't write anymore letters. I promise. If she comes back, just...just... don't hurt her," Harry tried not to blubber, it only enraged his uncle. His Uncle had threatened to put out rat poison for her.

"You best hope that she doesn't come back here, boy!" Vernon had snarled, "I won't have that dangerous animal around my family. I'm warning you..."

Harry's reply had been nothing short of cringing agreement, "I'll make sure she stays away. I promise. Please..." Harry had been cut off then, because Vernon had given him a back hand. It was all Harry could do to back into a corner and protect his head, as the tall man advanced menacingly. The terrified boy shut his eyes and waited for the first blow to fall.

"Harry!" Professor Snape not quite shouted. He sounded far too close. Harry could feel someone beside him as he crouched in the corner with his arms over his head.

Experimentally opening his eyes, he realized that he wasn't at Privet Drive at all. He was still in the bedroom of Snape's house. Snape was down on one knee, his drawn face about six inches away from Harry's. He didn't look angry, rather he looked...concerned?

"Let me see your hand," Snape's voice was low and soft. Abruptly, Harry remembered hearing Snape speak in just that tone the other night, when he was playing the part of the Storyteller.

Very slowly, Harry extended the hand he'd been using to protect his face.

Snape took it in his own, looking at the scratches and swelling. He made a low noise in his throat, "Come sit up here, where I can see it properly." he tugged on Harry's wrist, gently.

Harry didn't move for a moment. Snape let go of his wrist and grasped both his arms above the elbow. He stood and drew Harry to his feet.

Snape's wand appeared, "If I summon some calming draught for you, will you take it?" he asked, gravely.

Harry's expression must have shown his opinion on that, as he moved to sit on the bed. Snape sat down beside him, "Fine, then." he said, placidly (When had Snape ever spoken placidly?)
Lupin moved forward, "Harry? Can you tell me what happened then?" the man had stopped the cut bleeding, but it was still nasty looking.

Harry's right hand started to throb. He looked down at it, instead of Lupin, "I dunno. It seemed like I was...somewhere else." Experimentally, Harry tried to make a fist, only to discover that his fingers were now too swollen. That just wasn't a normal thing to do, Harry realized, "I'm going mad, aren't I?" he said softly.

"You're not going mad." Lupin said firmly, "You're reacting in a perfectly normal way, for someone who's been through what you have."

Harry bit back a hysterical giggle. There'd never been anything normal about him.

Snape grasped Harry's hand by the wrist again, waving his wand above it, muttering an incantation. He sighed, "You haven't broken anything," he sounded relieved. He waved his wand and a potion bottle whisked into the room from the bathroom cabinet, "I'd like you to take this."

Harry looked up into the man's face, "So you can interrogate me again?" he hissed viciously, the pain in his hand forgotten.

Lupin and Snape exchanged a glance, the look on Lupin's face clearly said, I told you so. Snape gave the other professor a sneer, in response.

Turning to Harry, Snape's face cleared, "It's merely a healing draught, I promise."

Filled with conflicting impulses, Harry just stared. The professor still looked worn, although the boy realized that Snape was looking much better. Oddly, he looked younger, too. That was funny, it had always seemed to Harry that Snape was much older than his Aunt and Uncle, but he couldn't be, if he'd been in school with Harry's parents.

Shaking off the irrelevant thought, Harry considered Snape's words. He hadn't said yesterday that he wasn't going to dose Harry. In fact, it had been obvious that something was in his tea. Harry just hadn't bothered to ask what.

"I promise." Snape had never gone back on a promise yet.

Hesitantly, Harry took the proffered bottle. It was dark green, almost brown and tasted like oily, bitter cucumbers, as he gagged it down. The effect on his hand was immediate, the swelling and pain began to ebb.

Lupin had drawn his own wand, muttering an incantation and vanishing the blood on his shirt. Snape was sitting on the bed next to Harry, so Lupin picked the desk chair up off the floor to sit in.

Hedwig made a clacking with her beak, almost as if in warning. Harry stared again at the long laceration, but Lupin smiled at him gently, "It's all right, Harry. Familiars are very protective of their wizards. No one is going to punish you or Hedwig for a misunderstanding."

Snape had said something similar about Snuffles.

Harry began to feel a hot, prickly blush rise into his cheeks. How many times was he going to lose it in front of these two? He scooted away from Snape to put his back against the headboard, wrapping his arms around his knees.

Lupin was watching him attentively, "So, can you tell me where you thought you were?" he asked again, his voice very gentle. He sat calmly in his pajamas, as if the incident were a perfectly normal
"I..." Harry hesitated, not sure how to explain. "It was like I was at my Aunt and Uncle's." He stopped, hoping that answer would satisfy the two men.

Neither one of the men spoke, Harry couldn't tell what they were thinking. Snape was looking at him like a bug and Lupin was trying his best to seem reassuring. Of the two of them, Harry decided he liked the "you're-a-bug" look better. At least it was honest.

"Did your Uncle frequently threaten your owl?" Lupin asked, apparently deciding that Harry wasn't going to say anything more without prompting.

That startled Harry, "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

It was Snape who replied, "You were asking your Uncle not to hurt her."

Harry didn't realize he'd said that out loud, "I...yes." he said miserably, then, although he wasn't under the compulsion of the Snape's truth potion, he found himself unwillingly saying, "All the time. I think he was worried about me writing to my friends. I...I guess he thought that, after last year, Mrs. Weasley at least didn't like the way they were treating me."

"What do you mean?" Lupin asked, curiously.

"She wrote them last year, I guess. Told them where I was. She must have said something they didn't like. Uncle Vernon said, he could tell she was a nosy busybody who only wanted to stir things and he didn't want me carrying tales to her." Harry shrugged, "I sent Hedwig away after I blew up Aunt Marge. Told her to go to Hogwarts and stay there."

"Did they say what she said to upset them?" Lupin asked, a frown creasing his eyebrows.

Harry shook his head, "Probably that she liked me. They used to call the nurse at school who liked me a busybody, too." He shifted uncomfortably, "Why do you keep asking about them? I'm not living with them anymore, anyway. You said so," this directed at Snape, "So, what's the problem?"

"The problem," Snape retorted, "Is that you cannot sleep a single night without a nightmare. You are prone to panic attacks at the drop of a hat. You have shut down so hard that you resemble an inferi." he paused for breath, "When you are not cracking windows and breaking cups, magically or otherwise."

"Why do you care?" Harry demanded, balling his hand into fists.

"I believe we covered this downstairs," Snape said, in that icy Snape-voice that Harry recognized from potions class.

Harry scoffed, while Lupin looked quizzical, "Oh right, 'cause it's your job. I guess you're getting paid enough. Aunt Petunia certainly was," he hissed, harshly, "I'll make really easy for you Professor. Don't try to talk to me and I'll stay out of your way."

Snape winced. Harry had never seen Snape wince before. "That's not what I meant." he said hoarsely, "I just meant that I intend to live up to my responsibilities."

"Well done, then." snarked Harry, crossing his arms and looking away, "You're only about twelve years too late."

The professor flinched, as if he'd been slapped, "Yes," he said hoarsely, "I am. And I am sorry." His
crossed his arms as well, holding himself stiffly, "I cannot offer you any excuse."

That was not something Harry expected him to say. Snape's black eyes caught his, holding them. In a voice of a man making a solemn vow, he continued, "But, I'm here now and I don't intend to go anywhere."

For some reason, that made Harry's chest go tight. He refused to give in to his impulse to cry, though. He was used to swallowing his tears, "Whatever." he said, in dismissive tone, imitating someone in an American film on the television (he hadn't actually seen the film, he was cleaning the living room while Dudley watched it on the video).

Snape looked...hurt? The expression was fleeting, however, the dour man's face rearranged itself to look determined, "It doesn't matter what you say or do Harry," he said softly, with his Storyteller voice. As he spoke he uncrossed his arms and leaned forward, towards Harry. He put his hand on Harry's foot, "I'm not leaving. I will get you through this."

Normally, Harry drew away when people touched him casually, especially teachers. However, with Snape leaning so close, Harry could smell the scent of ginger and allspice that clung to the man (perhaps he put it in his drawers, the way Petunia put lavender in hers). The scent was enormously comforting.

Harry wanted to rage and shout at the man, but all at once his anger drained out of him, leaving him exhausted. He'd meant to say something clever and snarky, but to his shame, in a voice that sounded very young to his own ears, he asked, "Promise?"

Snape nodded soberly.

Lupin, who had been sitting silent through the exchange, let out a long breath, "That's why we need you to talk to us, Harry." he said, "We need to know what you're going through. We can help, but only if you talk to us."

Harry nodded and shrugged at the same time, putting his face against his bent knees, "I just don't get why you think the Dursleys abused me. I just don't think it's as bad as what you're making it out to be," he said, into his knees.

"If Miss Granger told you she was experiencing the same things as you have," Lupin said, "What would you call it?"

Snape's hand hadn't moved off of Harry's foot. The contact was strangely comforting. One problem he always had with both the school nurse and Mrs. Weasley was that, although it was nice to be hugged, too much felt smothering. He supposed it was because he wasn't used to it.

It occurred to Harry that he had almost brand new white socks on. They didn't have any holes and they weren't grey with stains that would never come out. Snape had bought them for him. Enough socks so that Harry had a clean pair every day-at the Dursleys, sometimes he would only have a pair or two that were fit to wear. Snape had told the shopkeeper that Harry needed ten pairs white and ten pairs black. And, a few pairs just for Quidditch.

He looked up at Snape, who met his eyes again.

"Harry?" Lupin was still waiting for an answer to his question.

"I...uh...I don't know." admitted Harry, feeling befuddled, "But...well...She's not a freak, is she?"

Snape made an irritated noise, withdrawing his hand and reaching into the pocket of his robe for his
wand. He gave it a quick wave and a bit of parchment appeared, "I will have you writing lines, if you don't stop using that word to describe yourself." he growled, shoving the parchment at Harry.

*I am not a Freak*

Written one hundred times.

Harry didn't know why that suddenly had him sniffling. He let go of the parchment to use his sleeve to wipe his nose.

"That's still disgusting." Snape told him, handing him a handkerchief. He took the parchment from Harry's other hand, waved his wand, levitating it over to the wall over Harry's desk, and sticking it there, "I'll leave it there to remind you." he said.

That did it for Harry. The sniffling turned to real tears, he buried his face in his knees, wrapping his arms tightly around his legs.

A hand-Snape's hand by the scent of ginger and allspice-settled on his shoulder, Not moving, just resting there.

The three of them sat like that for a few minutes, before Harry gave a final sniff and looked up, mopping his face with the handkerchief.

"Perhaps I should go make some tea?" Lupin asked, softly, "Shall I bring it up?"

Harry suddenly felt claustrophobic, "No." he said, hoarsely, "I should come down. I'll help." As if making tea were some onerous chore.

He got up and turned to face Professor Snape, "Um...Sir?" he said softly, "I...umm...I'm sorry about your teacups...and...whatever else I broke." he looked sheepishly at the window.

"Don't concern yourself, Harry," replied the man. Astonishingly, Snape gave him a tiny smile, "At your age, one expects these things from time to time." He gave his wand a lazy wave and muttered a repairing charm. He stood wearily.

"Where's your cane, sir?" asked Harry, suddenly noting how unsteady on his feet the potion master was.

"Hmmph. I believe I left it downstairs, in my haste to see what the noise was all about." Snape replied, "Don't worry, I'll manage." Leaning heavily on the banister, he made his way downstairs.

Harry began to wash the dishes in the sink, but Lupin waved him off, "I'll get it, go sit with Professor Snape."

If Lupin was hoping that they'd start another conversation, he was disappointed. They sat around the table together, not saying anything for a few minutes. Lupin moved around the kitchen making himself food, "Have you both eaten?" he asked.

Snape and Harry both nodded, so Lupin set tea cups in front of them. They drank their tea in silence. Harry couldn't even say he was lost in thought, because right now, his mind seemed completely blank.

Lupin sat down with his own breakfast, and neither Harry nor Snape had said a word. Lupin looked at them both and seemed to find something amusing, if the quirk of his mouth meant anything.
The knocking at the door nearly made Harry spill his tea into his lap.

"I'll get it." Lupin stood to go down the hall, "I'll wager it's Mrs. Cook."

"Be careful what you say," growled Snape, "I do not want the Ministry here."

Lupin rolled his eyes, transfigured his pajamas into jeans and a sweater, and went to open the door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cook," Harry heard him say, "What can I do for you?"

"Sorry to bother you so early," she said, sounding worried about something, "I just thought you should see this. I imagine Severus doesn't have the paper delivered?"

Harry wondered what a Muggle paper could possibly have in it that Mrs. Cook would find compelling enough to bring over.

More surprisingly, Professor Lupin's voice went immediately from friendly to worried, "Oh my," he said, "Yes, thank you. We hadn't seen this yet."

Harry turned around to look down the passage at Lupin and Mrs. Cook. He was holding the paper in his hand.

Mrs. Cook looked very uncomfortable, "I...I'll be next door if you need anything," she said.

Lupin shut the door, "I-er-I'm not sure what we should do about this, if anything," he hesitantly put the paper down on the table.

Harry nearly spat out his tea. Instead he swallowed it and it went down the wrong way. When he was done coughing, he looked at the headline again.

_Couple Arrested for Child Abuse At Heathrow Airport_

Under the headline was a picture of Vernon and Petunia, in handcuffs, being escorted by police.
More stressful discoveries.

Lupin leaned over the table, his hands flat on the tabletop, scanning the news article. This particular paper was the type that had a great deal of celebrity gossip on the front and a bikini-clad woman on the inside page. Severus could see that the story wasn't on the front page, as it would have been if Harry had been in the Daily Prophet, but towards the back, with a few stories of true crime and other depravity.

Severus watched the other man's brow furrow, tried to gauge how bad it could be. "Well?" he snapped, having no patience to wait while the man read the damned thing to himself.

Harry was shaking like a leaf. "You said no one would find out," whispered the boy.

Severus gripped his wand in his pocket in case the child's magic acted up again. Carefully, he put his other hand on Harry's shoulder. That was becoming an increasingly natural gesture. It seemed to help—at least there were no exploding teacups. Harry scooted his chair towards Severus.

"What are they saying about me?" the boy asked, tremulously. Severus realized distractedly that there was a small hand gripping his robe.

"It doesn't name you." Lupin sounded relieved, his shoulders were relaxing by degrees. He pushed the paper over to Severus, retook his seat across from Harry.

The potions master let go of his wand, pulled the paper over to him to read, while he kept that steadying hand Harry's shoulder. The young wizard made no move to read the article, looking at the paper as if it were a dead rat

The picture showed Vernon and Petunia flanked on either side by police. Petunia was trying to cover her face with her handcuffed hands, while Vernon snarled at the photographer.

House of Horror!

Acting on information received from Scottish Child Care and Protection Network, authorities investigated the home of Vernon and Petunia Dursley, where they found evidence of horrific child abuse and neglect.

According to files, the couple have been arrested for keeping their 10-year-old, mentally impaired nephew locked in the bedroom for over two years, only allowing the boy out to do chores and attend school.

It appears that the boy was sent to live with his aunt and uncle after his parents died in a drunk driving incident eight years ago.

The young victim was only allowed to use the family bathroom for a few minutes in the morning and evening, according to reports. Neighbors say the boy, who has not been named, was only ever seen working in the garden.
"I've seen the poor lad working out in the garden from morning 'till night," says a next door neighbor, "Skinny little thing, but Petunia just used to say he was fussy about food. Of course with his problems, it was hard to know what was going on. He never spoke to anyone...wouldn't look you in the eye."

Out of place in the otherwise immaculate house, seven locks secure a grimy, ill lit upstairs room containing an old desk and a camp bed, while the bedroom next door overflows with the latest in electronic gadgets. A few ragged and stained but freshly laundered t-shirts hang in a pressboard wardrobe that looks like it was salvaged from a skip. Brown stains on the floor and bars on the window convey the impression of a Third World prison cell, rather than a child's bedroom. Even the smell is reminiscent-a bucket in the corner gives silent testimony of the duration of the child's imprisonment.

Worse evidence faced investigators, as they searched the house. In a boot cupboard under the stairs they found clear evidence that the child had been locked in there, possibly for a prolonged period of time. Children's scribbles and a few little stars, bright blue and lime green, appear to have been drawn across the walls in magic markers, sporadic flares of color on grimy ivory. A handwritten sign proclaimed it to be a boy's room and a dirty crib mattress with a blanket lay in the corner, a few broken toys hidden underneath it.

The abuse came to light during a routine health inspection at the boy's school, a secure facility for mentally disabled children. The exam found evidence of recent and past physical abuse, along with evidence of severe malnutrition.

The Dursleys told police they were forced to keep the child locked up to stop him taking food from the fridge, and to prevent him acting out dangerously, alleging that he assaulted a family member this past summer.

The couple's own son was apparently well treated, showing no signs of either neglect or abuse. When questioned, the older boy frankly stated that the other boy had been locked up almost every day since he'd come to live with them.

Experts say that it is apparent that the nephew was the victim of target child syndrome. Targeting one child for abuse is actually more common than people would believe. Many parents single out one individual child for their negative attention and abusive treatment...

Severus had read enough. He breathed a sigh of relief for sloppy reporting, "They've got your age wrong in the story. How well known is the Dursley name?"

Harry shook his head, "I hardly ever talk about them," he muttered. "I think only the Weasleys and Hermione know their name."

"The situation is not dire, then," Severus told him firmly. "Very few wizards follow Muggle news-particularly this type of paper. Those who do aren't likely to connect a mentally disabled ten-year-old with the thirteen-year-old Boy Who Lived."

"Dumbledore needs to be told, nonetheless," Lupin said, putting down his teacup. He stood up and summoned his cloak. "I should go inform him."

"Tell Poppy, too," grunted Severus. "I'll speak to Arthur Weasley. Should someone at the Ministry make the connection, he'll need to know."

Lupin nodded curtly, then paused to say in a gentle voice, "Harry? It'll be all right. Really."
The boy was looking rather green now; too much drama in one morning, "They must have talked to the Wilkinses," Harry muttered, ignoring Lupin completely. "Mr. Wilkins always thought I was a lot younger than Dudley. Aunt Petunia told Mrs. Wilkins I was mental."

Lupin caught Severus' eye over Harry's head. "Will you be all right until Arthur gets here?" he asked Severus solicitously. He gave a smile that Severus assumed was supposed to be encouraging.

"Wait." Harry shook himself, apparently taking in what Lupin said. "You mean Mr. Weasley?" At Lupin's affirmative nod he asked, "Why is Mr. Weasley going to be here?"

Severus replied, "Professor Lupin has some pressing business tonight and tomorrow at Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey feels that we need some help while he's gone. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have invited us to stay with them." He peered closely at the boy to see how he'd react, somewhat relieved to see that the child was at least curious.

Briefly Harry met Severus' gaze. The child's open face reflected uncertainty, distrust and something like pleading. Then his eyes seemed to go blank and he looked away. "All right," he said quietly. He scratched Snuffles' head. "What should we do with Snuffles? he asked. "I don't know if they'll have room for him."

Lupin smiled gently. "I'll take him back to Hogwart's, shall I? He can stay with Hagrid overnight." The professor patted his hand against his thigh and Snuffles jumped up to go to the man.

Harry nodded vacantly, still not meeting either man's gaze. Bereft of the dog, the child let go of Severus' robe as well, folded his hands in front of him on the table and stared at them.

"Pack up some clothes for two days," Severus told the child, hoping to distract him for five minutes. That vacant nodding again, but his trembling had subsided. "Did...did you tell Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about...?" He trailed off.

"No," Severus replied firmly. "They know I have been ill, but that's all. You may decide how much or little to tell them."

"I'd rather they not know," Harry said in a subdued tone. His hands and his shoulders slowly relaxed, so Severus assumed that he was at least a little reassured.

"That's fine, Harry," Lupin assured him. "Whatever you're comfortable with."

Harry stood. "I'll just..." He made an uncertain gesture with his hand in the direction of the door to the hallway and then turned on his heel, fleeing the two men.

Severus listened to the boy's light tread on the stairs. Taking his wand from his pocket he threw a one-way silencing charm on the door.

Lupin watched him with interest. The dog sat next to the man, looking as interested in whatever Severus had to say as Lupin did.

"What do you think this will mean to Harry?" It galled Severus to ask Lupin for advice, but he was out of his depth.

The other man sighed. "I'm afraid this is likely to hit him pretty hard once it sinks in." Lupin looked up at the ceiling and then crossed the floor to sit back down. "He's been telling himself that his relatives weren't that bad. I think that this," Lupin spread his hand to indicate the headline, "is likely to bring home to him how abnormal the whole situation was. It's better for most people if they're able
"Do you think he's in danger of harming himself again?" Severus asked in a low voice, verbalizing the fear that most haunted his thoughts. A shiver passed through him as he involuntarily pictured again the scene of Harry, barely breathing, almost unconscious and struggling against the makeshift rope.

The man looked uncommonly grave. "I'm afraid we can't discount the possibility that this could send him right over the edge." He shook his head. "But I think for now, a verbal agreement with him not to injure himself is the best we can do."

Severus nodded his understanding. In his experience, sworn word was indeed a preventative to suicidal gestures. In his own students, he'd found that the very act of promising to speak to someone first was often enough to derail the impulse.

Lupin went on, "I would say that Harry’s need for silence on this should be respected. Not to mention that although I trust the Weasleys’ discretion, I shudder to think what would happen if the Ministry were to get wind of this."

"Don't talk to me about the Ministry," snarled Severus. Suddenly all the tension twisting through him seemed to come to an abrupt boil. "You hardly need tell me what their views on *felo de se* are," he spat. At the other man’s blank look, he growled, "I'm sure you must have heard about my mother's death?"

Lupin shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

That surprised Severus, he'd assumed that the whole mess had been common knowledge at school. Other Pureblood students had certainly not been shy about discussing it. Although, now that he considered it, Lupin had never been one to listen to gossip.

"My mother's death was determined by the Ministry to be self-murder," Severus said in a deadly quiet voice.

Lupin's eyes grew wide, his face paling. "I...I didn't know that," he said putting a hand out toward Severus. "I'm sorry."

Severus wished he felt well enough to sweep from the room in a temper. He settled for snatching his hand out of Lupin's reach. "Spare me, Lupin," he hissed, crossing his arms over his chest. "The Ministry...did they...?"

"Confiscate my mother's assets?" gritted Severus, "Drag her name and the name of her family through the mud? Refuse her burial in her family crypt? Yes, on all counts."

Lupin looked positively distressed. "Severus..."

"Never mind," Severus said wearily; he just didn't have the energy to sustain his anger. "That's neither here nor there. Getting back to Harry, I'll talk this latest over with Arthur. He sent me an owl this morning that he and his eldest son will stop here around lunchtime to escort us."

"I'll stay until then, in that case," said Lupin, "Dumbledore can wait."

Severus shook his head. "I disagree. I think you need to inform the Headmaster immediately and I certainly don't want to put this in an owl."

He also really wanted Lupin to leave him in peace, rather than hovering over him like a nervous nursemaid.
The other professor sighed, shifting uncomfortably. "If that's what you prefer." He stood again. "You can reach me until this evening. Moonrise is around six."

Severus nodded sharply. "Go check on Harry before you leave," he said, not having the wherewithal to climb the stairs again.
"Anything you need before I go?" Lupin stood at the door to Harry's room with a leashed Snuffles, keeping a cautious eye on Hedwig, who was making low noises in her throat and bobbing her head threateningly. Snuffles lowered his head and gave her the slightest of growls.

_Not from you_, the young wizard thought resentfully, but all he said was, "I'm fine." He kept tossing stuff into his bag, refusing to look at Lupin.

The man stepped forward into the room. Hedwig did not like that; she bobbed her head more deeply and made a sound halfway between a "Kreck" and a hiss, clacking her beak and spreading her wings.

Snuffles yipped and growled at her more loudly.

"Stop it, you two." Harry said sharply, looking up from his packing. Both his familiars subsided: Snuffles with that look of shame dogs sometimes get, Hedwig with more dignity, merely folding her wings and turning her head away from the intruders.

Lupin gave him an evaluating look, nodded, "We'll see you day after tomorrow, then."

Harry shrugged, "Whatever," he muttered. He sort of liked the way the word felt in his mouth. The minor insolence made him feel a bit more in control.

The professor made to walk away, but Snuffles tugged against the leash and whined. Harry left his packing to come over and give his dog a scratch behind the ears. "Sorry about this," he told the animal quietly, "but you'll be okay with Hagrid." One last pat and a scratch and Harry let the animal go with the professor.

The rest of the morning passed quietly. Harry heard Snape put on some of his music in the living room. The record was one he was apparently fond of, as Harry had heard him play it several times. It suited Harry's mood too, dark and angry. Some of the lyrics could have been pulled from his own head.

"...cold as a razor blade,

_Tight as a tourniquet,

Dry as a funeral drum."

The boy smiled bitterly, as the next bit sounded like someone throwing things around and shouting at someone to musical accompaniment. The singer said something about looking for his favorite ax. Harry thought he'd quite like an ax at the moment.
He threw the Invisibility Cloak into his bag, after some consideration. Hedwig, still alert on her perch, looked at him enquiringly.

"We're going to the Burrow," Harry told her. "You meet us there, okay?"

She bobbed her head and nipped his fingers affectionately. Harry opened the window for her, then settled down onto his bed with Tales of Beadle the Bard. He was restless, though, nervous about seeing Ron again. He was just happy not to have to face Hermione yet.

The phone ringing startled Harry out of his thoughts. The music cut off.

"Hello?" Snape's voice said. "Yes, this is he." A pause. "Ah." A longer pause, then Snape's voice became too quiet to hear from where Harry sat on the bed.

Curious about who could be calling, Harry crept out onto the landing. It didn't sound like Mrs. Granger; Snape's voice sounded very formal, as though he were speaking to a stranger.

"We'll be in Ottery St Catchpole tonight and for the next two days," Snape told whoever it was. "Yes," the man's voice was smooth and urbane, "I quite understand...That would be most convenient, yes. I beg your pardon, but could you hold for just a moment?"

The sound from downstairs abruptly cut off. Snape must have cast a silencing spell.

Harry settled himself to sit on the top step anyway.

After about fifteen minutes, Snape emerged from the kitchen. He turned and saw Harry sitting on the top step. He stood at the bottom. "Are you packed?" he asked.

Harry nodded, thinking that Snape was looking very haggard from all the drama that morning. For a second, the boy felt bad for upsetting the man when he was still so clearly ill. Then he reminded himself that Snape and Lupin had decided that drugging him was a good idea. Snape also thought that leaving him with the Dursleys when he was a baby was a good idea.

How often had Harry dreamed as a small child of someone coming to rescue him from the damned cupboard? Snape could have done so at any time. Whatever Dumbledore's game was, Snape hadn't needed to play it.

A small voice in the back of Harry's head reminded him that Snape had said that he really had thought that Aunt Petunia would be a good guardian.

Angrily, Harry dismissed that. Back in the summer, they all thought Aunt Petunia had been a good enough guardian, but now she was up on charges?

Taking a chance, Harry took a deep breath as Snape climbed the stairs. "Did they say why Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia got arrested?" he asked as the man brushed past him.

"The Scots Child Protection notified English authorities, who must have filed the charges," Snape replied, pausing on the stairs.

"Scots…?" Harry repeated slowly. "Where does Scotland come into this?"

Snape was standing on the same step Harry was sitting on. He walked down a couple stairs and sat next to the child. He looked at his hands as he spoke. "Hogwarts is in Scotland," he said quietly. "Madam Pomfrey had me give Mrs. Granger your file to take to a social worker friend of hers. The file said that your school made a report and that you have been put into my custody by Scots Child Protection authorities."
Protection. It meant that they would have to charge the Dursleys in England. Your file has a charm on it that ensures that it will find its way back to Arthur Weasley. It also has an obfuscation charm, which is likely why so many facts in the story are wrong." The man sighed heavily. "It never occurred to me that they'd be arrested so publicly or on a slow news day."

"You...? And Madam Pomfrey...?" Harry felt befuddled and hurt. "But... why?" He never thought Madam Pomfrey would be added to the list of people who'd betrayed his trust.

Snape's black eyes were snapping with anger when he turned to look at Harry. "Because what they did was criminal, Harry." His voice was soft, even though he looked murderous. "We cannot bring them to justice in the Wizarding world, but we can have them brought up on charges in the Muggle court."

"You gave me your word you wouldn't tell anyone," Harry said softly.

"I didn't..." Snape denied, but then he stopped, blew out a long breath. He started over in almost a whisper. "Sadly, not all promises can be kept, despite our best efforts." His voice gained volume as he continued, "I assumed that what was most important to you was that the Ministry and the Prophet stay out of it."

Well, yes, that was true, but Harry hadn't wanted to get into the Muggle papers, either.

"Perhaps you should read what was written," Snape said, standing.

Harry shook his head; he had no interest in reading the thing.

"As you wish." Snape walked up the stairs, into his room. Harry assumed he was getting dressed. A few minutes later, Snape emerged in wizard robes rather than the Muggle clothes he'd been wearing around the house. He glanced down at Harry when he went past, but the boy wouldn't look at him.

Harry didn't know how long he sat on the stairs. Long enough that the professor's album played all the way through. He feared to speculate on what Ron was going to say about this whole mess and Hermione was going to be impossible. His stomach hurt. He wondered if he should mention it to Snape, but then he thought about how the man had slipped him that truth potion and he put that thought right out of his mind.

Someone knocked at the door. "I've got it," Snape called unnecessarily. Unnecessary because Harry wasn't planning on moving until he absolutely had to.

Mr. Weasley and another redheaded man stood at the door. Mr Weasley smiled at Snape. "Professor Snape, how are you feeling?"

"Well enough," grunted Snape, stepping aside so the men could come in. Harry thought that this was the longest Snape had been awake since that night.

When they came in, Mr. Weasley and the other man seemed to give Snape a long, appraising look. Harry wondered what they were seeing.

After an uncomfortable pause, the man Harry didn't know said, "Dad told us what you did for Ginny, sir," his voice was low, as though speaking to someone who was deathly ill. "When I found out..." he swallowed hard. "That spell hasn't been used in fifty years or more." As he spoke, Harry remembered seeing this man in the hospital wing the morning they left Hogwarts. That must be Bill Weasley, he surmised. The Weasleys had visited him in Egypt last summer.

"I'm aware of that, but it is still taught to healers," Snape replied stiffly. There was something strange
in Snape's voice. Defensiveness?

The man nodded. "But it's not exactly normal healing magic, is it? Don't forget I'm a curse breaker." The way he said it seemed to imply that he had some special knowledge of the spell.

Bill was not what Harry would have expected. He didn't dress much like a wizard, nor did he dress like a wizard pretending to be a Muggle. Like Snape, he seemed to be consciously trying to project an image. In Bill's case, he wouldn't have drawn a second look from Muggles on the street, unless it was to admire his style. His hair was longer than Snape's and also held in a ponytail. He had an earring shaped like a sharp tooth in one ear and boots to match his leather coat. He wouldn't have looked out of place at a rock concert or a posh nightclub.

"Then in that case, I should say as well as can be expected," Snape growled. "I must admit, your expertise on this spell is probably superior to mine. I only have a few books that reference it, and without access to the library, I haven't been able to research it adequately." Snape shocked Harry by this admission of ignorance.

Apparently he surprised the Weasleys, as well. They glanced uncertainly at each other and then Mr Weasley said, "Bill has a great deal of knowledge about… ahh…obscure spells of this type. And… well…I just want you to know—we understand what you've done. Anything that is in our power to…"

"At the moment, I believe that all I need is a quiet place to sleep for the next forty-eight hours," interrupted Snape, impatiently cutting off Mr. Weasley's hesitant speech.

"Of course, Professor," said Mr. Weasley deferentially. "Where's Harry?" He looked around. Spotting Harry at the top of the stairs, he gave him an encouraging smile. "How are you, Harry? Do you need help with anything?"

"I'm fine, Mr Weasley." Harry smiled back at the man, trying to keep his nervousness from showing.

"Harry?" Snape turned to look up the stairs. "Would you retrieve my bag from my room?"

"Yes, sir," replied Harry, standing up and doing what he was told.

He picked up the small leather bag that Snape had left on the bed. It seemed too small to hold a change of clothes, but Harry supposed that was Snape's problem. He went to his own room, swung his own bag over his shoulder and hurried down the stairs.

"I don't think you've met Bill," said Mr. Weasley when Harry reached the bottom.

"Hello, Harry." Bill put out his hand to shake Harry's. "Good to meet you."

"Do we have everything?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Snape looked at Harry appraisingly before muttering, "Wait a moment. Accio Harry's broom." The closet in Snape's room banged open and Harry's broom zipped down the stairs to hover in the air next to him.

Harry took it out of the air, staring at Snape in disbelief. He hadn't even bothered asking if he could take his broom, on the assumption that Snape would never allow it.

The tall man smiled slightly. "You nearly forgot that," he said, sounding like it had been a plan all along.
"Right, are we fit?" asked Bill, as though nothing extraordinary had happened. "I'll take Harry then. Have you ever Apparated?"

The boy shook his head.

"Well, just grab hold of my arm." Bill took Harry's free hand and wrapped it around the crook of his elbow. It happened too quickly for Harry to realize what was happening. He felt as though he'd been sucked into a black hole through a straw. Before he really had time to panic, he was on his knees in the front garden of the Burrow.

"All right there, Harry?" Bill asked kindly as he reached down to help Harry up. "It can be a bit unpleasant at first, Apparition."

Harry swallowed hard, hoping he wasn't going to puke on Bill. After a second the urge passed.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley swooped down on him, seemingly out of nowhere, and engulfed him in a brief hug. She backed off to hold him by the shoulders and stare him in the face. "You look a bit peaky," she said. "Have you been eating? Professor Lupin said you'd been feeling under the weather."

The boy smiled a little and nodded. "Just haven't been sleeping well," he muttered.

"Well, I'm glad you're here, dear," she said gently. "The lunch is on the table. You go on in with the boys, we'll be along in a minute."

Harry gave her a grin and headed into the house. If nothing else, he could look forward to two days of her excellent cooking.

Chapter End Notes

A/N If anyone is interested, I've started posting "Digging" over at my Dreamwidth page with the author's notes I didn't leave here. paganaidd.dreamwidth.org

The quote is from the song "One of my Turns" from The Wall by Pink Floyd
Chapter Summary

Harry's emotional cauldron bubbles over and Severus receives unexpected information.

Chapter Notes

A/N I'm just going to repeat my statement that there are NO actual pairings in this story. Please read to the end of the chapter before deciding I'm a terrible person. Also, please remember that the age of consent and the age of majority are not the same thing. Since the age of majority in the Wizarding World is 17, a year younger than where I live, so it follows that the age of consent is also a year younger.

No, there is still no explicit sexual content here-nor anything even close, just more insight into Wizarding culture.

Thank you, Badgerlady for your much needed help and Aleegirl for your input.

Arthur Weasley politely held out his arm for Severus. Resenting the necessity of needing another's power for Apparating, the professor gritted his teeth and took it.

After a moment of suspended darkness, Severus' feet touched earth. His knees, then his two hands followed.

"Professor Snape!" called Weasley in alarm.

Severus didn't answer, unable to speak while he vomited into the grass. He closed his eyes tightly, the spasms shuddering through him, leaving him utterly limp as they passed.

He heard a quiet conversation between the two Weasley men; Mrs. Weasley's higher voice joined them.

Fortunately, he didn't hear either his charge or the infernal voices of the any of the Weasley boys. Taking a deep breath, he chanced a look around himself. It appeared they were alone in the Weasleys' yard. That was a mercy.

"Professor?" Mrs. Weasley was kneeling beside him, "Do you think you can get up now? I can conjure a stretcher…"

"No," Severus rasped, shaking his head, "Thank you," he added, grudgingly. "If you and Mr. Weasley could just..." he paused to breathe, "just help me up."

Immediately, two sets of hands grasped him by the elbows and drew him up, steadying him as he stood on shaking legs.

"I beg your pardon," Severus bit out, appalled by his own weakness. He'd never been this ill after
Apparating, not even coming home from a Death Eater meeting where Crucio had been liberally
thrown about.

"Quite all right," Mrs. Weasley said softly. She stood in front of him while the two men stood on
either side. "Would you like a stomach-calming draught?"

Severus shook his head, trusting more of his weight to his own feet. "It's passed now," his voice
grated in his dry throat.

Mrs. Weasley gave her husband a glance. "Do you think you could have some tea and see if it stays
down?"

"Yes. Thank you." Severus took the cane that Mrs. Weasley bent down to pick up from the ground
and offered to him. He pulled his arms from the grasp of the two Weasley men. "And then, if you
could just show me where you'd like me to sleep, Mrs. Weasley."

"Yes, of course, Professor," Mrs. Weasley said. "And please, call me Molly." She said this as though
she were a little hurt that he'd forgotten that she'd already told him this. "Bill? I told the boys to start
without us. See if your sister needs any help."

The young man gave them all a doubtful look, almost as if he were afraid to leave his parents alone
with the grim potions master, but all he said was, "Right, mum," before heading off to the door of the
house.

Severus heard the young man raise his voice as he walked in, but didn't catch the words. Hopefully
he was stopping the Weasley twins from having the kitchen down around their ears.

"Come long then, Professor," said Molly. "Arthur and I can help you, if you need…"

"No. I'm fine," growled Severus, having had enough of the overly solicitous woman. He managed to
stagger into the house under his own power. He was not going to appear in front of that pack of
children looking as though he were ready to drop dead.

The loud talk from the kitchen came to an abrupt halt as the three walked in. Percy, Ron, Fred,
George and Harry were all seated at the table. Bill and Ginny were nowhere in evidence. The boys
had taken Molly at her word and were already tucking into shepherd's pie.

One of the twins jumped up out of the chair that was closest to the door and next to Harry. He took
his plate and passed it to his twin, who put it at the empty place on his other side. "Take this seat,
sir," he said, so politely that Severus immediately suspected a trick.

Harry must have, as well. He gave Fred (this was the twin wearing a sweater with an "F" on the
chest) a look of open-mouthed horror. Then his eyes flew to look at the adults.

Molly didn't seem to bat an eye. She took Severus by the shoulders and steered him to that chair. His
only choice was to sit there or get involved in an undignified struggle with the woman. He was far
too tired for that and decided that he would be entertained by whatever hell Molly cooked up for her
son after he embarrassed the family.

"Get the professor some tea," she told Fred, who was still standing, briskly. "Two sugars and extra
milk, am I right?" she asked Severus kindly.

He nodded numbly as he gingerly sat down. Absolutely nothing happened.

Harry stared at him, then turned to look at Ron on his other side, mouthing something that Severus
couldn't see. Ron shook his head minutely.

Arthur took his own seat on the other side of the table, filling a plate with food and passing it over to Severus. Fred came back with tea from the pot that was sitting on the sideboard, giving it to Severus with a smile. "Here you are, sir," he said politely.

Severus heard Harry snort and cover it with a cough. He glanced up at Severus, his eyes holding an expression other than anger for the first time all day. Probably for the first time since Ginny had overdosed, come to think of it. Severus own mouth twitched upward at the corner.

Apparently that was enough for Harry's self control to go to pieces, and he erupted in a fit of giggles.

"What?" demanded Fred.

Harry just shook his head, seemingly unable to get a grip, while he kept laughing.

The surrealism of the whole scene struck Severus suddenly, and he laughed too.

The room froze for a second, the children—except for Harry—staring at their humorless professor. Severus was so tired that their reaction set off more laughter. After a moment, he thought he had himself under control, taking a deep breath, but he made the mistake of looking at Harry.

Harry, for his part, had almost got himself together and was trying to restore his composure by taking a sip of tea. At meeting Severus' eyes, he seemed to inhale over his mouthful and got the most peculiar look on his face, before involuntarily spitting the entire mouthful out, spraying the table, himself and Severus.

Harry gasped in a breath, staring at Severus, clearly expecting the back of the man's hand.

The boy's horrified expression drew another laugh from Severus; he couldn't help it. He couldn't have said what was so funny, but he started laughing again and didn't stop.

The rest of the people in the room erupted in laughter too.

"God, Harry!" said one of the boys, over the laughter. "Can't take you anywhere."

"No, you have to take him twice," called one of the others. "Once to apologize."

Somewhere in the chaos, Severus felt his damp clothes dry. Molly had taken out her wand and, with an indulgent expression, she was cleaning up the spilt tea. Her eyes met Severus' and her smile contained as much relief as the boys' laughter.

The meal continued noisily, although the laughter seemed to have faded now. The boys were talking merrily and loudly to each other and Arthur.

"I'm sorry, Molly," Severus finally had enough breath to say, "I…"

She patted his arm as she sat down in the seat George hastily gave up to her when she gave his shoulder a shove. "Don't worry about anything, Professor," she said, happily helping herself after summoning a plate.

"What did we miss?" Bill called. He and Ginny stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She looked wan and pale, but at least she was on her feet and dressed.

The boys tripped over themselves trying to explain what had happened to Bill, who gave Severus another one of those worried looks as he and Arthur helped get Ginny settled into a chair and served.
Ginny avoided looking at both himself and Harry, Severus noticed. Arthur filled her plate for her and she was able to pick up a fork, although her handling of it was clumsy. Her appetite still seemed to be off, for she chased her food around on the plate rather than put any of it in her mouth.

Most of the boys had already finished eating, by now. Molly looked around at them and said, "Why don't you lot all go out to the orchard with your brooms?"

This suggestion was greeted with great enthusiasm. The boys hurriedly started taking their plates over to the sink.

Harry glanced at Severus, suddenly apprehensive, "You don't mind if I…?"

"Go on, Harry," Severus said, sighing. The fatigue was catching up with him. "Just… Be careful."

The child nodded, biting his lip.

"Go on, dear." Molly was still sitting next to Severus. She poured him some more tea. "I'll look after the professor."

Harry smiled, looking relieved. He grabbed his broom from beside the kitchen door as all the boys thundered outside.

"Professor?" Bill asked quietly from his seat beside Ginny. He glanced almost apologetically at his sister. "We…ah…we were wondering if you felt up to discussing…"

"I don't think we should talk about that now," Arthur broke in, his tone more decisive than Severus had ever heard it. "Professor Snape is clearly exhausted. I think this should wait until he's had some time to rest."

Bill nodded, but his eyebrows were drawn together in a frown and he crossed his arms over his chest.

Ginny looked up at Severus, meeting his eyes briefly. She hurriedly looked away.

In point of fact, Severus was too exhausted to have any kind of conversation.

"Come along," Molly said gently. "Let's get you lying down."

She took him by the elbow and led him down the hallway. Severus was relieved that she seemed intent on putting him in a bedroom on their ground floor. Knowing that the Weasleys were not well off, and knowing how many people lived in their house, he'd worried that he would have to sleep on the couch in their front room.

When she opened the door, it was clear that she was putting him into her and Arthur's bedroom.

"Molly, there's no need for me to put you out of your bed," he felt compelled to mutter.

"Don't worry, Professor," she replied. "I'm still sleeping in Ginny's room with her. Arthur will be perfectly all right taking Charlie's bed in Bill's room. We've put Harry in with Ron, so it's all fine."

Severus just didn't have the strength to argue, although he did say, "It seems foolish for you to keep referring to me as 'professor'. Severus will do."

Molly beamed. "Of course, dear."

She seemed to feel he needed help quite as much as he had done when he was in the hospital wing.
Although she didn’t attempt to support him, she stayed right beside him until he was sitting on the edge of the bed. She’d already turned down the blankets.

He shrugged out of his outer robe and handed it to Molly; she took it and hung it on the back of the door. "Do you need anything else?" she asked. Someone had already put his bag on the end of the bed. Arthur or Molly must have conjured it here.

Severus contemplated fishing around in his bag for a nightshirt, but decided against it. The woman might take it into her head to help him change into it. "No, thank you." He bent and pulled off his boots and lay down in his shirtsleeves and trousers, tucking his wand under his pillow.

He was so tired that he fell asleep before Molly closed the door behind her.

It was an undetermined number of hours later that he was woken by voices yelling. "Mum! Harry fell off his broom!" was the only thing Severus understood from the cacophony.

The boy's words of the day before echoed chillingly through Severus' mind, and he thought his heart would stop.

Three steps took him into the hallway, and four long strides took him into the kitchen, elbowing his way past the gaggle of red-headed boys who stood at the door.

"Let me have a look then, Harry," Molly was saying. "How did you ever fall off your broom?" She was much too calm, by Severus' estimation.

Harry was sitting with his back to the door to the hallway. The injury couldn't be seen from where Severus was standing. "I didn't fall…" the child began.

"Then what did happen, Harry?" Severus demanded, harshly.

"Oh, Severus," Molly said, looking up from examining the boy's injuries. She had the audacity to smile at him. "Ron, get the professor a chair and a cup of tea." She looked back down at Harry. "Now hold still dear, I'm rather good at this." She paused, concentrating. Apparently she was good at healing magic because she was using a nonverbal healing spell.

Severus kept his mouth shut, not liking to disturb her when she was in the middle of fixing whatever damage the boy had managed to inflict on himself. He took the offered cup of tea and the chair, but sat on the edge of it, tight with anxiety.

"There, all done. How does that feel?" she asked when she finished waving her wand in front of the child's face.

"Better, thank you." Harry replied politely.

"What happened, Harry?" Severus repeated his question. His voice was a little louder than it needed to be in the crowded kitchen.

Harry finally turned to look at Severus. The front of his shirt was just soaked in blood, "I…er…"

"He fell off his broom," one of the twins asserted.

"I did not," Harry returned hotly. "You missed that Bludger and it knocked me off." The child looked nervously at his guardian. "It was an accident," he said more quietly. "I swear."

"And all this blood?" asked Severus tightly.
"Bloody nose," the youngest Weasley boy put in. "He always bleeds like that when he gets one."

Molly's Scourgify made short work of the blood on the shirt. "You lot go get cleaned up for dinner," she said, sounding completely unperturbed. She made little shoo-ing motions with her hands. "Go on."

The entire cavalcade of boys trooped up the stairs; Severus found himself alone in the kitchen with Molly.

He sipped on his tea, feeling his shoulders relax slowly. He realized belatedly that he held his wand in his hand. He had snatched it up when he left the bedroom. Feeling slightly foolish, he tucked it into the pocket in his sleeve.

The witch didn't say anything for a few minutes, puttering about in the kitchen instead. She put some biscuits in front of him. "You should eat something, you're too thin."

"I'm fine," Severus sighed. He took a biscuit anyway.

Molly gave him a sort of measuring glance. "Harry's put on some weight." She sat down at the table with her own teacup. She looked almost as tired as Severus felt. "It's good to see."

"How is your daughter?" Severus asked in an effort to be polite.

"She's getting better. She limps and she's always tired, but the healers say that's normal." Molly shook her head. "She's still very quiet. We've had her seeing the mind healer Poppy recommended. I'm not sure if it's helping, but Arthur and I... we've been going with her sometimes. It's very helpful for us. She's been explaining some of what Ginny's been experiencing."

"Where is Miss Weasley now?" Severus asked.

"Sleeping." Molly indicated the large clock that stood on the end wall of the kitchen. There were many hands on it, each with a little picture of someone's face. Severus counted eleven hands in all.

The hand that had Ginny's face on it was pointed to "Bed."

After another minute of staring, Severus realized there were two raven-haired faces among the redheads.

Sure he must be mistaken, the professor stood to look more closely at the clock. Molly seemed to be holding her breath.

"Is that...? Did you put me on your family clock?" Severus asked, dumbfounded. There was his picture, sneering at him when it noticed he was looking.

Molly came to stand beside him, twisting the tea towel up in her hands. "Ah... no. The clock is spelled to add family members automatically. It's only added the children before now. It was like that when we got back. Bill says that it's because of that spell."

"And Harry?" Severus asked quietly.

"He appeared at the same time," confirmed Molly. "Bill and Arthur should be home soon. We, er, wondered if we could speak to you about this, actually." She was still twisting the tea towel around in her hands. Her voice was a bit higher than usual.

"About what?" he asked, feeling bemused. His knees started to ache, so he walked back to the table.
"The spell. We've been conferring with a few experts Bill knows. On the quiet, of course." She followed him back to the table. "It's not something I knew much about and…” her mouth twisted like she'd eaten something sour, "I really have no interest in consulting with Dumbledore about this."

Severus nodded. The headmaster wouldn't be very popular around the Weasley household at the moment.

"But… why aren't Minerva and Poppy there?" asked Severus after a moment of thought.

"Bill says it's probably because Poppy's taken the Healer's Oath and Minerva's Head of Gryffindor."

That made sense, Heads of House were in loco parentis and had obligations to their students beyond merely a student-teacher relationship. Plus, the Weasleys had been sorted into Gryffindor since Weasleys attended Hogwarts.

"Bill said that the spell goes back to the Founders."

"Did he?" Severus said distantly.

"Helga Hufflepuff invented it." Molly poured herself some more tea. "Or so goes the legend. Bill wanted to reassure us, I think. It's acquired a rather… dark… reputation since then."

"Yes." Severus wondered where this conversation was going, and how long it would be before he could in courtesy go back to bed.

"If you don't mind my asking… where did you learn it? I mean…" Molly was twisting the tea towel around her hands again. "Did you take any Healing Oaths?"

The man shook his head. "No. I went as far as Medi-wizard with healing, but no further." Severus found that small talk was always tiresome at the best of times; now it was outright exhausting. "You'll forgive me, Molly," he said, setting down his tea cup, "I'm afraid I'm not up to conversation."

"Oh, of course." She jumped up and followed him back the room he was sleeping in. "I'll fetch you in some dinner later, shall I?" she asked. "And we really do need to talk about things."

She sounded quite concerned, Severus thought, but his brain was moving far too slowly to understand why.

It was much later when he awoke again, the room dark and the house quiet. He levered himself up and lit his wand. Now, he was hungry.

There was light and hushed voices in the kitchen,

"Yes, but don't you think he knows that?" Bill Weasley was saying.

His father replied, "According to Remus, he's been in quite a state. Of course, now that I've spoken to him…"

The three of them fell as silent as first years caught out of bounds when the professor came to stand in the doorway.

"Severus. How do you feel?" Molly was sitting at the table with Bill and Arthur.

Severus shrugged dismissively; he wasn't interested in discussing himself. "Where's Harry?" he asked, much more concerned with his ward.
"Harry went to bed about an hour ago," answered Arthur. He exchanged a tense look with his wife and son.

"Is something wrong?" demanded Severus. "Harry…"

"No, no," Molly said. She stood up and guided him to a chair, yet again. Severus was going to have to get her to stop doing that. "Harry's fine. He seems a little depressed, poor thing. Remus sent us a copy of that dreadful article."

Well, that saved Severus from breaking the news.

Molly went to the stove. "I have stew, if you're hungry." She picked up an empty bowl and looked at him inquiringly.

"Yes, please." The Weasley men were staring fixedly at Severus. "You have something to say to me?" he asked as they continued to look at him, even after Molly had put the full plate of stew in front of him.

Arthur cleared his throat and looked away, but Bill squared his shoulders. "We were wondering, Professor," he said, very seriously, "whether you were planning on exercising your prerogative in regards to Ginny?"

"I beg your pardon?" Severus asked, completely nonplussed. Obviously he was missing something. "My… prerogative?"

Rather than give a straight answer, Bill picked up a very old book that lay on the table, opened it and gave it a tap of his wand. He then passed it over to Severus.

The magically highlighted paragraph read:

'Ware the Dark Uses of the spell. It is said that it lends itself to Necromancy as pieces of soul are traded to Death and dwell beyond the Veil.

In balance, the casters should be either Healer, blood kin or sworn kin, for the binding of one soul to another is irrevocable. A caster who is neither kin nor Healer has rights of refusal in the apprenticeship, adoption or marriage contract.

Do not cast without due consideration, as the consequences are thus:

Severus stopped reading at the laundry list of side effects.

Molly and Arthur reached out to take each other's hands, looking at him apprehensively. Bill leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowed in suspicion and challenge.

"I'm afraid I don't understand your point." Severus said, feeling rather confused. He handed the grimoire back to Bill.

"We just need to know… er… where you stand on this, Professor," Arthur said quietly, hesitating over his words. "We haven't said a lot to Ginny, but I know she understands the debt. The mind healer suggested we speak to you before we talk with Ginny. And naturally, we'd prefer that you held off anything… er… terribly physical, until she finished her education." Arthur's face turned a bit white, while Molly's cheeks colored. "We were wondering if it might be better to have her transferred to Beauxbatons, until she came of age, if you… ah… felt awkward about it."

Severus still wasn't following at all. "If your daughter wants to transfer for the remainder of her
education, I fail to see what that has to do with me," he said slowly. This conversation was entirely nonsensical as far as Severus could see. He had no idea what to say.

Molly apparently read the confusion on his face, "Professor… Severus," she said softly, "the soul bond gives you the right to ask for Ginny's hand. In marriage."

"Madam, there are laws against that," Severus replied, appalled.

Bill made an impatient noise in his throat. "Professor, according to the laws, Ginny's eligible to marry at fifteen. Obviously, we'd prefer she wait until she was finished at school, but the soul bond gives you the right to…"

"She is my student, Mr. Weasley," interrupted Severus hotly. "And a child in a particularly delicate state of mind. I hardly think being betrothed to the resident dungeon bat is going to be much good for her mental health." He realized his voice must have gotten quite loud when Arthur cast a quick silencio and an imperturbable charm for good measure. "Please put your minds at rest—I have no intention of exercising this particular prerogative." He said the last word as if it were an imprecation.

Molly smiled brightly, giving her husband and son a look that said, I told you so.

Bill wasn't finished. "An apprenticeship, then?" he asked doubtfully. "She's a good potions student, but…"

"God forbid," growled the potions master. "And I have my hands full enough with one ward, thank you very much."

Bill shifted nervously."What do you want, then?"

"At this instant? Peace, quiet and perhaps another cup of tea." His voice came out petulantly.

He realized uncomfortably that many wizards in his situation would jump at this chance. Never mind his personal inclinations, to marry into a respectable Pure-blood family would guarantee his acceptance into certain Wizarding circles. Although the Weasleys were considered eccentric, their name was older than the Prince name. It would make Snape a respectable house in itself.

Molly jumped up and went to put on the kettle.

"But surely, sir…"

Enough was enough. "Mr. Weasley, I am beginning to find this line of discussion rather insulting. I have no inclination to marry a woman and I did not save your sister's life because I had hoped for some personal gain, but rather because it was my duty."

"But it wasn't… not really," Arthur said quietly.

"Yes, it was." Severus looked down at his bowl, pushing it away as he realized he'd lost his appetite. "Arthur, tomorrow go to the records office and look up the death certificate and inquest report of one Eileen Prince-Snape."

Bill latched onto a different part of the statement. "Erm, Professor? Should we be calling Charlie back from Romania?" He looked at his parents for confirmation. "I mean Charlie understands what we owe you."

The penny didn't drop for a moment, then: "Your brother wouldn't be any happier with me than your sister," Severus said gruffly, taking the tea Molly handed him. "If you must arrange a betrothal, I'm
sure my ward and your sister are a much more appropriate pairing."

Bill smiled for the first time since Severus had arrived at the Burrow. "That'd make Ginny happy," he quipped.
The Burrow was almost the same as the last time Harry had visited: ghoul in the attic, gnomes in the garden and Quidditch in the orchard. The house was, perhaps, a little more chaotic than last summer and Mrs Weasley looked tired but, on the whole, it was the same cozy place.

There was that bit of weirdness when they first got there. When Snape had walked into the kitchen and one of the twins jumped up to get the man tea, Harry had been convinced that some prank or another was in the offing. He couldn't believe the twins would be bold enough to do it right in front of Mrs. Weasley.

"Is he mental?" Harry mouthed to Ron as George (he was the one in the "F" sweater, but they hardly ever wore the right sweater) went to pour the man a cup of tea. The red-headed boy shook his head, with a definite "we'll talk later" look on his face.

Nothing had happened except that Harry's overstrung nerves finally snapped in a fit of giggles that ended in his spitting his tea all over Snape.

With that kind of provocation, Harry reckoned he deserved a clip around the ear at the very least. Instead, the man had just laughed. Suddenly Harry understood what Lupin must have meant about "profound changes."

When Mrs. Weasley sent them all out to the orchard to play Quidditch, Harry was able to ask the twins, "What the hell was that? I thought the teacup was going to turn into a rat or something."

Ron and the twins exchanged uneasy looks. "Mum would've had our guts for garters if we did that," Fred said gloomily.

"Well yes, but you were… I don't know… like you were trying to impress him or something," Harry said, hefting his broom over his shoulder.

George shrugged uncomfortably. "Dad said that Snape's part of the family now." He was unwontedly serious. "He's on the clock and everything."

"So's Harry," Fred pointed out.

"I am?" asked Harry, astonished. "Why am I on the clock?" He felt a warm little glow settle into his stomach, and he smiled properly for the first time in what seemed like forever. "Did your parents put me on there?"

Ron shook his head. "No, the hand just appeared there."

"We reckoned maybe 'cause Mum and Dad put in to adopt you," said Fred. "I dunno how that works, but that's bound to be it."

That made sense. Perhaps just putting in the paperwork or whatever made it happen. The little glow
in his stomach became brighter. Maybe that would mean he could leave Spinner's End and move into the Burrow until Hogwarts' wards were reset. Maybe he should ask Mr. and Mrs. Weasley what was going on. Perhaps he could come here for Christmas.

That thought had an oddly melancholy feel. Harry wondered how Spinner's End would look, all decorated for Christmas. For some reason, Harry was sure that Snape would let him put up whatever he liked, if he asked, and Mrs. Cook would come over to ooh and ahh.

"So has Snape been all right to you?" Ron asked as the twins walked a little ahead.

Had he? It was so complicated. The last four weeks were a blur and Harry didn't want to talk about it. Was giving him truth serum "being all right"? He'd sat with Harry all that dreadful night telling him kids' stories and holding his hand. He came in and checked on Harry every single night and carried him to bed last night (was it only last night?).

A dreamlike memory drifted to the forefront of Harry's mind; sometime last night he had woken, or half woken, into a horrible state where he could neither move nor cry out. He had known that Vernon or Voldemort (more likely both) must be in the room with him, but he could do nothing to defend himself. He wanted to scream or lash out with his fists, but he was held tightly in his paralysis, the only sound from him was high-pitched whimpers.

How long he had lain like this was impossible to tell; it felt like forever. Even the dog had disappeared.

Then, miraculously, the scent of ginger and allspice announced the presence of the potions master. "Sssh." The man's hand went to his shoulder, shaking him gently. "Harry, love, you're dreaming." The sleep-blurred voice of the potion master was rough. "It's all right."

He remembered opening his eyes; Snape's tired black eyes were filled with concern, and then the bed was jarred when Snuffles had leapt back onto it.

"Go back to sleep, son." Snape smiled at him, gently.

Harry had closed his eyes, reassured by the sounds of the chair being dragged across the room and the creak as the man sat down in it. He'd drifted into a deeper, more tranquil sleep, secure in the knowledge that nothing bad would happen to him while Snape sat there.

"Yeah," Harry told Ron, trying to puzzle out whether that had really happened or if he'd just dreamed it. It had seemed real, but how likely was that? "He's been mostly all right." The truth serum thing had been a bit evil though, "He's still a bloody bastard sometimes," Harry finished.

The three other boys looked uneasy again, Fred and George stopping to turn and look at Harry and Ron. Harry was reminded of the times when he'd said "Voldemort" out loud.

Ron opened his mouth and then closed it.

"Erm... " said George. Fred shifted nervously.

"What?" demanded Harry.

Ron finally broke the silence. "Er... Don't... you know... call him names in our house. I mean... " Ron held his free hand up palm out in a sort of surrender gesture. "He's your guardian and all, you... " Ron hesitated, looked at the twins. "We ought to show him... some respect."

"You what?" Harry looked incredulously around at the other boys' dead serious faces, "Where's this
coming from? Last time we talked you were quite happy to call him all sorts of things."

"Yeah, but that was before Ginny," Fred said quietly, not meeting Harry's eyes.

Seeing that Harry still didn't understand, Ron took a deep breath. "That spell. It's pretty dark, according to Bill."

"How can a healing spell be dark?" asked Harry, not following.

"It means that he's got a serious claim on Ginny, so he's got the whole family by the balls," George said bluntly, "See, the casters give a piece of their soul to Death. That's more than a life debt. That's like… I don't know… about as indebted as you can get."

"Well, what about Pomfrey and McGonagall?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head, "McGonagall's Mum's fourth or fifth cousin and Dad's I don't know, related somehow. Anyway, she's blood related. That means she's got right-of-kin and she's Ginny's head of house. It means that the spell knows she's already bound to us. Pomfrey's a healer. They take all those oaths to negate life debts."

"Soooo…?" Harry hated it when he had to ask someone to spell out some aspect of the magical world.

"So," said Fred gloomily. "It means that just like we have Auntie Muriel, we now have Snape."

"And according to Bill," George picked up, "Since Snape was the incantor and put the most power into it, the spell recognizes him as the Master Wizard. That means…" George trailed off, having a hard time putting whatever it was into words.

"That means," Fred jumped in, "that Snape can marry Ginny, or adopt her, or take her on as an apprentice or even a fill-in for his house-elf if he wants."

Harry's mind reeled. "Snape doesn't keep house-elves." He said numbly, "But that's horrible!" There was a burst of something hot in his chest; he felt it warm his cheeks. Snape adopt Ginny? That would leave Harry out in the cold again. Startled, he realized he didn't want to have to share Snape's attention.

"But, he's been all right to you, has he?" Fred asked worriedly. "He's not got you slaving over his house or anything?"

"No, he's been fine." Harry thought about the Storyteller. "He's been really good, actually."

"Well, he hasn't been starving you," said Ron. "You look like you've put some weight on."

Harry nodded. "Snape goes mad if I miss meals."

They didn't talk about Ginny or Snape any more, although Harry felt sure they had a million questions they wanted to ask.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of Snitches and Bludgers. After a while, Bill came out with his broom to play with them.

The only hitch to the day was when Bill hit a Bludger at Fred, who dodged it instead of hitting it back. Harry was in just the wrong place at the time.

Harry had been chasing the Snitch and didn't see the Bludger until he ran into it.
Shit, Harry thought the next time he opened his eyes. He was lying on his back with a blurry circle of redheads surrounding him. His face felt mangled and he wasn't entirely sure he understood how he got here.

"My glasses?" Harry choked out, and then started coughing as something dripped down his throat. He sat up on his hands and turned over so he could spit onto the grass. Thick globs of red appeared. He really hoped he hadn't completely destroyed his glasses. The red kept dripping onto the grass.

His nose throbbed and every throb felt like it was making his nose expand. His cheek was so swollen that his left eye couldn't open.

"Well done, Fred," remarked Bill, sitting on the grass to have a proper look at Harry's face. "Broke his nose. And one of his cheekbones, I think. Harry, let me look into your mouth."

Obediently Harry opened his mouth.

"Oh good, all your teeth are still there. Mum hates putting those back," Bill said cheerfully, "Do you think you can walk?"

Harry nodded. Bill helped him shakily stand, but didn't let go of him. Ron handed him his glasses. Instead of the twisted pieces of wire Harry had been expecting, they were whole and unmarked. Right, Snape had gotten him glasses with a self-repairing charm. He'd also gotten him an extra pair, just in case he lost the first. For no other reason than to make Harry's life easier.

Harry's glasses had always been a sore point with Petunia. "Don't you break those," she'd say. "You can go about blind if you do. I'll not pay for another pair." Of course, now Harry wasn't sure that she'd actually had to pay for the first pair. Snape seemed to imply that the NHS should have paid for them.

Tears joined the blood dripping from his face.

"Here ya go, Harry." George handed him a handkerchief. "Pinch your nose with that so you don't bleed out before we get you back to the house." Harry was glad he had the excuse of blood dripping down his face to explain away the tears. It did hurt, but he'd had much worse. He didn't want the Weasleys to think he was a baby.

Snape was going to be so worried when he saw this mess. That simple thought seemed to hit Harry's unstable emotional equilibrium like a hammer blow. Snape was going to be angry with Harry, not because it was an inconvenience to him, but because it was his job to make sure Harry was safe. Because he'd be scared.

Scared. For Harry.

Harry's breath hitched a little.

Mistaking his idiotic crying for a gasp of pain, Bill said, "Take it slow, Harry. You fell off your broom, too."

Remembering the conversation with he'd had with Snape, Harry realized that the man would think he'd done it on purpose. It would hurt him, "Don't… don't let Snape see me like this," he gasped. "He'll be so upset."

Bill stiffened. "All right, Harry," he growled softly. "Fred, run and get Mum. Tell her what happened. We'll bring up Harry." Wasting no more time, Bill simply scooped Harry up and carried him, leaving Ron and George to follow.
"Will he punish you, Harry?" Bill asked in a low voice.

"I expect so," said Harry miserably.

"How?" Bill asked fiercely, surprising the boy with his tone.

"Most likely take my broom away," muttered Harry, "And he'll have me writing long essays about broom safety or something."

Bill's arms relaxed a little. "I'll tell him it was Fred's fault. He should have gotten that Bludger."

"Thanks," Harry said, relieved. "He's been so tired. I don't want to worry him."

Something in Bill's face softened.

"Sit him down here," said Mrs. Weasley, indicating a chair facing the door as Bill carried him in. "Let me have a look, then, Harry." She waved her wand and took the handkerchief away. No more blood dripped down his chin.

Bill whispered something into Molly's ear as she worked, then he moved away.

"How ever did you fall off your broom?" she asked, calmly.

Harry hastened to correct her, "I didn't fall…"

Mrs. Weasley looked at something behind him. "Oh, Severus," she said, and smiled gently. "Ron, get the professor a chair and a cup of tea." She looked back down at Harry. "Now hold still dear, I'm rather good at this." She waved her wand in front of his eyes and things shifted painfully in his face.

Harry didn't cry out, though; he didn't want Snape to come around and look at him. His eyes dripped tears.

"There, all done. How does that feel?"

"Better, thank you," Harry replied. She gave another little wave and his face was suddenly clean and dry.

"What happened, Harry?" Snape said loudly.

Harry reckoned he could turn to look at his guardian now. "I… er…" He realized that there was blood all down his jumper.

"He fell off his broom," Fred said.

"I did not," Harry retorted, turning glaring at Fred. "You missed that Bludger and it knocked me off." Snape sat stiffly, and Harry could tell that the man was grinding his teeth. "It was an accident," he said more quietly, turning back to his guardian. "I swear." He met Snape's eyes, willing him to understand that Harry hadn't broken their agreement.

"And all this blood?" asked Severus tightly.

"Bloody nose," Ron said casually. "He always bleeds like that when he gets one." Harry could have kissed Ron in that moment. Snape relaxed minutely, even sighing.

Mrs. Weasley muttered something and all the blood disappeared from Harry's jumper. "Go get cleaned up for dinner," she said, shooing them out of the kitchen.
Harry was seized with the sudden mad impulse to give Snape a hug. For no other reason than he’d come running the instant he’d heard that Harry hurt himself.

Of course, Harry didn’t. Snape would have probably hexed him. When they all got back to the kitchen, Snape had already gone back to bed.

Harry followed suit, going to bed far earlier than he normally would. Mrs. Weasley came to his rescue when the twins started teasing him. "You go on, love," she said. "Bludgers to the face take it out of you."

That was two "loves" from two different people in twenty-four hours. That had to be a record. That thought seemed to warm him right through.
Chapter Summary

Severus gets some answers

Side effects
The bustle of Molly Weasley’s house began early. Her footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs long before daylight. Arthur and she spoke in the kitchen in soft tones for a while before the back door opened and shut. Back up the stairs went her footsteps. Her voice was still soft, as though she were trying to avoid waking up the house. A younger, higher voice answered: Ginny. The footsteps that came down the stairs with Molly’s were halting, uncertain.

A few minutes later, quick male steps came down the stairs. That had to be Bill—Percy always walked very deliberately and the younger boys still sounded like a herd of colts.

Only three voices in the kitchen—Arthur must have gone to work.

The measured tread of the Head Boy came down the stairs. The young man’s voice in the kitchen confirmed it.

Molly was cooking. The scent of sausage wafted through the air. Fifteen minutes after that, the expected galloping of a herd of lanky teenage boys thundered down the stairs.

Severus lay on his back listening to the house’s waking up sounds and wondered if he could get away with hiding in here all day. Perhaps if he pretended to sleep every time someone came in…

A little knock made up his mind.

“Yes? Come in.” he called, resigning himself to being fussed over and invited to breakfast.

It was the boy (“Your SON, Severus!” said Lily’s voice, loudly) with a tray full of food and a mug of tea.

“Professor?” the boy said quietly. “Mrs. Weasley thought you’d probably want to stay in bed for a bit.”

Severus sat up. The child put the tray down on the bedside table and hurried to help arrange the pillows.

The man sighed. “Pass me my cane,” he said, “I’ll be back.”

Fortunately the bathroom was right next to the room Severus was sleeping in. He was so stiff these last few mornings. He’d have to see if there was something he could take for it. He was tired of feeling as though he were older than Dumbledore.

It was some time before he emerged. The boy was waiting in the hallway for him.

“For god’s sake, Harry,” Severus said in exasperation, “there’s no need to hover.”
The child smiled a little. “Mrs. Weasley said I should make sure you’re okay.” He lowered his voice after a quick glance up the passageway. “I don’t want to get on her bad side.”

Severus found himself sharing the conspiratorial smile with the child. “Certainly not.”

So the boy would behave for Molly? He didn’t seem afraid of the woman.

Lily’s voice sounded amused. “You can catch more flies with honey, Sev”

The teacher in him decided to ponder that. His Slytherins were generally more well-behaved for him than other students. He’d always assumed it was merely house loyalty, but thinking on it, he realized that his interactions with his own students were marred far less by his temper. Perhaps he should ask Minerva about how she ran her classroom. His Slytherins seldom complained about her and some of them had real affection for her in spite of her stern manner.

Thinking on it now, he realized he’d always had a small measure of affection for the old cat. She was strict, but she never played favorites with students. Come to think of it, although she loved them, she never used to favor James Potter and his friends over himself in matters of discipline the way certain others did.

“Remember what she did to them after that stunt at the lake?” Lily’s voice asked in his head.

He didn’t for a moment, but then he vaguely remembered seeing Black and Potter mopping and polishing the floor of the Great Hall for months, even into October of the next school year. He remembered it particularly because some of the Sytherins took to maliciously spilling stuff onto the floor.

That was actually a good deal more punishment than they had received for nearly killing Severus. He’d gone to the headmaster after that escapade; perhaps he should have gone to Minerva first.

It seemed that he had more allies than he’d always thought. When he began teaching, Minerva had always been cautiously friendly. They had occasionally had words over students from their respective houses, but all in all their relationship had been pleasantly collegial. Things had been tense between Minerva and Severus since the truth of Harry’s parentage came out, but perhaps their relationship would thaw now.

When he emerged a few minutes later, Harry followed him back into the bedroom. Someone (Severus hoped it was Molly, but suspected it was actually Harry) had made the bed and turned down the blankets.

“You are not a house-elf,” Severus growled softly, “and I don’t need you acting like one.” The man nonetheless allowed the child to draw the blankets up over him and put the breakfast tray on his lap.

The boy shrugged and didn’t answer.

“Did you at least eat?” Severus sighed.

The child nodded. “Mrs. Weasley said I’m still too thin,” he muttered, crossing his arms as he straightened.

Giving him a critical look, the teacher nodded. “I’d have to agree. Did you take your potions?”

Another nod. “Do you need anything else, sir?”

Severus wasn’t sure he trusted this respectful pose, but he merely shook his head. “No, thank you,
Harry. Go spend the day with your friends.”

The child gave him a half smile and a muttered “Thanks.”

Severus applied himself to his egg and toast, wondering if he wanted to get up after breakfast. He was so tired.

That refrain was beginning to get old.

“Severus?” called Molly’s voice on the other side of the door. “Can I come in?”

“Yes,” the potions master called back, resigning himself to more Molly fussing.

She was dressed in a travelling cloak and held two letters in her hand, “These just came for you, dear,” she said, handing them to him. She spoke with an almost fond note in her voice, as though he were an old friend. “Now, I’m taking Ginny to the healers this morning. Bill is around and he’ll get you anything you need.” She handed Severus a small bell from her pocket. “Don’t get up unless you feel up to it. Bill will hear this. I’ll be back by teatime. I hope you’ll feel up to joining us? We can explain to the children what we’ve decided then?”

“I should speak to Harry first,” Severus said firmly before she could close the door.

The words, or more likely, the tone made Molly pause and look back at him quizzically.

“Being Muggle raised, the boy would have no context for this betrothal nonsense. Most likely the boy would assume he’d be forced to marry your daughter, whether he wanted to or not. That’s not something he needs to be worrying about in his mental state.”

Molly came fully back into the room and shut the door, “Is he all right, Severus?” she asked seriously.

“No,” Severus admitted. “He’s nowhere near it.”

Molly opened her mouth to ask another question but the man cut her off. “I can’t tell you about it. That’s for him to do, if he wants to.”

She nodded solemnly. “All right, whatever you think best.” She glanced at the little clock on the table. “I’ll be back later. We’ll talk some more? Oh, and I forgot, Remus Floo-called this morning. Apparently Albus,” her voice dripped disdain all over the headmaster’s name, “needed him for something today, so we won’t see him till tomorrow or the day after, at the latest. Bloody old man.”

She hissed, “He’s not happy unless everyone’s running around after him.” Molly’s brown eyes flashed with anger.

Severus sighed, “I’m sorry, Molly. We’ll be out of the way in the morning.”

“Oh my dear, I didn’t mean that I wanted you to leave.” She leaned over and patted him on the hand as though he were one of her sons. “You’re not going anywhere. You can hardly get out of bed.”

She looked at the clock again. “I must go, we can’t be late.”

With that she crossed the room and closed the door behind her.

Severus finally looked at the letters in his hand. One had the familiar Hogwarts crest and was addressed in Albus’ handwriting. The other…

The other was a rich cream envelope addressed to him in a beautiful script; he’d only ever seen
envelopes like it on Lucius’ desk. The seal had the crest of Gringotts Suisse.

With shaking hands, Severus slit the envelope.

Sir,

I trust this letter finds you in good health. Attached is the full accounting you requested. I had the pleasure of serving the Prince family for many years, and I am delighted that the heir to the Prince fortune has resurfaced…

Impatiently, Severus skipped over the obsequious groveling in the letter and flipped to the accounting on the next page.

The writing was tiny, the paper enchanted to magnify the print as he put his finger to each line item.

As he went over the list, the reason the goblins were corresponding with him on the luxurious parchment and ink suddenly became clear. If this was accurate (and goblins were never inaccurate when it came to the contents of their vaults), Severus was more than well off—he was the Malfoy type of well off.

He had never really believed his mother when she used to tell him stories of her Prince relatives. He had always assumed she was embroidering the truth or outright fantasizing.

The proof that she had been truthful seemed to bring on a wave of painful memories. It brought to mind that last Christmas holiday, when Tobias and Severus had fought almost continuously.

Toby had lost his job at the mill and the more Eileen tried to appease him, the worse he got. Severus was as tall as his father and refused to let the man take out his temper on his mother anymore.

The worst was the day Eileen had received an owl. She hardly ever got owls, but this one had tapped on the kitchen window, causing Toby to throw an almighty fit, demanding to know why her relations couldn’t use a bloody phone like ordinary people. Of course, Severus had shouted back at the man that Wizards weren’t like bloody Muggles and that was a good thing.

She’d not been able to read the letter for hours after it came, as she was trying to calm both Severus and Toby down. It was only after Toby had drunk himself into a stupor that she had been able to open it.

Her face had gone very white as she read it. She had bundled herself up in her winter cloak and left the house without a word. She never told Severus or Tobias where she’d gone when she returned the next morning, but after that, she seemed different.

Since Severus had first started Hogwarts, she had become increasingly reclusive, until she hardly ever spoke, but she suddenly became almost loquacious. At the time, Severus had felt relief because it appeared that Eileen had become the mother he remembered from when he was very tiny. She sang and laughed for the first time in years, not even caring when Tobias missed Christmas dinner because he was passed out drunk in the living room. She’d merely served up dinner for herself and Severus. He remembered that they’d had some elf-made wine with dinner. The first Severus had ever had.

The last time he’d seen her was before he got on the train back to school.

“Don’t worry about me,” she’d said, with a serene smile, “I’ll be fine.”

That spring she had sent him a letter that told him he shouldn’t ever worry about her, she’d worked
out how to make everything better. He’d taken that to mean she’d finally gotten the courage to leave her drunken sod of a husband. She meant something very different, as it turned out.

Two weeks after that letter, Dumbledore, Slughorn and Poppy had called him into Slughorn’s office to tell him that his mother had been found dead that morning.

These conferences were sadly commonplace because of the war. However, his mother was no war casualty.

His hands shook harder and he felt wet tears slide down his cheeks. He squeezed his eyes shut against the tears and the memories, but the memories refused to stop, as did the tears.

The Ministry inquest had found her guilty of self-murder and confiscated every last Knut from her vault at Gringotts.

Eileen Prince had to be buried in a Muggle cemetery, because no Wizarding cemetery would take the body of a suicide.

Severus remembered that the first people he had seen when he returned to the castle after her funeral had been the Marauders.

Black had started in on him—Severus couldn’t remember what he’d said now—and Severus had only stopped short of casting an Unforgivable because Lily had gotten into the middle of it.

She’d been furious at him. He’d been furious at her because she so clearly took the side of Potter and his friends, even as he’d just finished burying his mother. He remembered how hard it had been not to break down in tears in front of his old friend.

“I swear I didn’t know until later,” Lily-in-his-head said sadly.

He knew he was making that part up. The Tribuo spell had unsettled his mind and his subconscious was making up comforting things for the Lily-voice to say. Everyone at school had to have known. Slughorn could barely look at him, as though the taint of his mother’s suicide would rub off.

When Lucius had written him the next week, saying that the Dark Lord wanted to meet him, Severus had been astonished. The Dark Lord had seemed so understanding of Severus’ pain. He’d given Severus a way to redeem his family’s name and a way to strike out at the Ministry. N[H1] ot until later did the broken-hearted young man discover what the Dark Lord’s plans were really about.

All those years he’d spent being so angry at Eileen, at least some of the anger appeared to have been misplaced. She had obviously realized what was likely to happen to her pitiful life savings if she killed herself and had taken steps to prevent it, hiding her wealth in the Swiss bank.

But that didn’t explain how this wealth had come to her in the first place. He’d worn secondhand robes to Hogwarts, paid for out of his mother’s meager earnings from selling Dark charms and love potions to merchants in Knockturn Alley, or else out of whatever Eileen could stop Toby from drinking down the pub.

Severus glanced back to the letter.

… heir to the Prince fortune…

So the old bastard had not disinherited Eileen before he died, after all? Eileen was their only child, but Severus had assumed old Tiberius had left his money to St. Mungo’s or something.
A soft knock interrupted his thought.

Severus wiped his face with the handkerchief he had sitting on the side table. When he was sure his face was dry, he said, “Come in.”

It was Bill. “How are you, Professor?” he asked, picking up the tray with the half-finished breakfast.

“Well enough, thank you,” Severus replied gruffly.

“The boys are out on their broomsticks this morning,” Bill said. “Can I get you more tea, or something? Or maybe something to read? Mum says you’re staying with us another day or two.”

The dour man grunted in the affirmative. After a second he said grudgingly, “Another cup of tea would be welcome. And perhaps you can get me a quill and parchment? I have some letters to write.”

“Yes, sir,” Bill replied cheerfully.

It was only a minute or two before Bill was back. He came in and shut the door behind him, before handing Severus a fresh cup of tea and the quill and parchment.

“Thank you.”

Bill stood there as though gathering his courage. “Ah… I owe you an apology, Professor,” he said hesitantly. “I thought… well, since you haven’t taken any Healing Oaths…” He hesitated some more.

Severus cut him off. “You assumed that I could not have learned that spell through legitimate channels. That I had in fact been taught that spell by someone with nefarious intent?” he snarled caustically. It felt good to vent some of his feeling on a safe target.

Bill’s face went almost as red as his hair. “Well… I spoke to some of the other Cursebreakers when I heard. One of them said that You-Know-Who was experimenting with it during the war… and I heard… well, one of the goblins actually told me you had Death Eater ties and I… I’m sorry, it was wrong of me to assume…”

“You would not be wrong in your assumptions,” Severus said quietly. “I have had… connections to the Dark Lord. I spied for Dumbledore in the war. And it was indeed the Dark Lord who taught myself and several others that spell. I’m afraid my knowledge of it is quite incomplete. I am aware that it will save a life when other means will not and I know it is best done with three, but I’m afraid I wasn’t aware of the… side effects.” He paused to consider. “It certainly explains why the Dark Lord wanted to experiment with this particular healing spell.”

Bill stared at the professor as if he’d never seen him before. Shaking his head in wonder, he pulled his wand from a pocket and conjured a chair to sit on. “You mean you didn’t know what it did?” His eyes were huge.

“I knew it saved lives. At the time, it was all I needed to know,” Severus snapped, “or would you have preferred I let your sister die?”

“No, I told you, I’m sorry. But didn’t you know it worked as a Necromantic spell? And a Bondage spell?” Bill said, very quietly.

“Necromancy?” scoffed Severus. “Don’t be ridiculous.”
“I’m not,” Bill asserted. “There are books in Gringotts that they never show to wizards who aren’t under oaths of secrecy. I looked it up in a few of them. Tribua allows you to speak to the dead.” His voice dropped to a whisper.

Severus was irresistibly reminded of films he’d seen with his father that invariably starred Christopher Lee or Vincent Price. Any minute now, someone was going to play a theremin in the background.

“If I want to talk to the dead,” he said contemptuously, “I need only wander the halls of the castle until one of the ghosts wants a chat.”

Bill shook his head again. “No, I mean it lets you talk to the dead who’ve gone on. Not ghosts. Have you had anything like that happen?”

“Not so you’d notice,” Lily whispered and she laughed.

Severus felt all the blood drain from his face.

“Professor?” Bill reached out, as if to stop him from falling off the bed. He quickly grabbed the mug of tea that was in danger of slopping all over the coverlet.

“I’m all right, Mr. Weasley.” Severus tried to stop his hands trembling with no success. His voice sounded distant to his own ears.

“I think you better lie down, sir,” Bill said. He put the mug down on the bedside table and helped rearrange the pillows to get Severus lying down.

It was much better to be horizontal. The room didn’t seem as likely to spin. He tried to process what he’d just heard. The idea that the voices in his head, the people that he was meeting in his dreams—that they could be real was almost too much to bear.

“Severus! Calm down. It’s all right,” Lily told him.

“Get out.” Severus’ voice was choked and thick. He wasn’t sure whether he was talking to Bill or Lily.

“All right, sir,” Bill said, sounding worried. “I’ll check on you in a bit, shall I?”

“Get out!” He turned onto his side in order to turn his face away from the young man, appalled that the tears threatening should fall while he spoke to his former student.

The door opened and shut. Severus curled up and sobbed as he had not done since Lily died.
Arrangement

Chapter Summary

Harry and Severus discuss the details of this betrothal.

Halfway through the morning, the November sky opened and dumped what sounded like buckets of water on the roof of the Weasleys’ house. From the thumps and good-natured noise, it seemed the rain had driven the boys indoors. Mrs. Weasley hadn’t returned yet—it sounded like Bill was organizing them all into making the lunch. Bill had knocked on the bedroom door, very quietly, about half an hour ago. Severus had steadfastly ignored it, feigning sleep when the young man had peeped around the door.

Severus was sitting up now, contemplating everything that had happened in these few days. He sincerely hoped the solution they’d worked out last night would satisfy the Soul Bond. Magical debt was nothing to be trifled with. And one of this magnitude? If they didn’t do something about it, it could hang over the girl’s head her whole life.

It was quite possible it would prevent her from ever being able to enter into any magical contracts. Then too, according to Bill’s goblin sources, it was possible that wages from any magical employment or inheritance would simply end up in Severus’ vault.

The spell had been created as a healing spell, but apparently there was good reason that it was so highly restricted. Tribuo was normally only ever taught after healers had taken their Oaths of Binding, Silence and Non-harm. Gods only knew how the Dark Lord had gotten the spell from a healer.

Severus had made the comment about betrothals in jest, but Molly had seized on it. She’d come up with a solution that would hopefully appease the spell and gave Harry one more layer of protection from both Dumbledore and the Ministry.

It was strange that Molly was so devious—she’d have done well as a Slytherin. Perhaps that was where the twins got their propensity to mayhem. Certainly Arthur had always seemed far too straightforward to have fathered such a pair of troublemakers.

The voices in Severus’ head were remarkably quiet now. Lily had tried to speak with him earlier, but Severus had closed his mind to her, as he would have to a mental attack. It had never occurred to him that her voice and the dreams he’d been having were anything other than the products of his own overstressed imagination.

The noise the Weasley boys were making was cut off abruptly. It seemed that Bill had cast a silencing charm on the bedroom door.

Although Severus appreciated the thought, he didn’t care to be unable to hear what was going on outside his door. He cancelled the spell with a quick flick of his wand.

A female voice that was not Ginny’s or Molly’s added itself to the din. It sounded like Granger—Molly must have invited the girl over for the day. The greetings must have been what prompted Bill to cast the spell on the door.
The children’s noise grew less after a while. It sounded like they’d drifted off to other parts of the house.

Finally deciding he could hide here no longer, Severus dressed himself and hobbled out to the kitchen.

Bill was there, doing the washing up with precise little flicks of his wand. Clearly he was a man well used to looking after himself.

For some reason, it made Severus think of Toby. The old drunk could barely find the fridge when Eileen wasn’t around.

All at once, he felt light-headed, his vision greying around the edges. If his father started talking to him in his mind or his dreams, Severus realized he didn’t know what he’d do. Hopefully, the only dead a Necromancer could speak to would be Wizarding dead.

Oh, Merlin, Morgan and Circe, thought Severus a little hysterically, I’m a Necromancer.

Necromancy, like spells of Bondage, was one of the darkest of Dark Arts. There was debate about whether those spells were even real--Severus had never really believed they were.

Severus knew he was fortunate--St. Mungo’s healers had all assumed that Poppy was the incantor and she had not disabused them of the notion. That meant that Severus wouldn’t be penalized for an illegal use of a spell.

He shivered a little. Necromancy. The very word set sensible wizards quaking.

That would be why the Dark Lord had been so interested in the damned spell, but the mad bastard hadn’t dropped that little bit of information when he taught it to his most trusted servants.

Severus, like the others, had assumed that it was another of the Dark Lord’s schemes to keep himself alive at any cost.

The Dark Lord had also spoken of capturing one of his particularly annoying opponents and testing the technique on them.

Of course, the Dark Lord would have loved old Mad Eye, Crouch, Minerva, or gods forbid, Dumbledore himself, bound to him.

His robes felt very cold and clammy.

“Professor?” Bill took a step towards him, as if afraid that he was going to collapse. “You all right?”

Severus felt himself sway on his feet. He looked down; the hand not gripping his cane was white-knuckling his wand. He didn’t remember even pulling it out. The hand shook. Trying to get a hold of himself, he tucked it away. “Fine,” he grunted.

He took a seat at the table. “I trust there were no untoward incidents this morning?”

Bill set a cup of tea down in front of Severus, who nodded his thanks, then said, “No, they were fine. Stayed out of trouble the whole morning, for once.”

“Did Harry eat something?” Severus asked, trying to occupy his mind with the prosaic.

Bill nodded, a little smile playing on his lips. “Yes. Everything I put in front of him. And he took the potions Madam Pomfrey prescribed.” The man’s face sobered. “Uh, he said that Madam Pomfrey
said he needed to gain weight, but what was the other one for? It...er...it looks like the one Ginny’s been on for...” Bill paused, looking discomfited. “Y’know.”

Severus held the other wizard’s gaze. These were things one didn’t speak of openly in pureblood households. He decided he could dare a little honesty with Bill, given that the younger man was remarkably mature and was fairly clear on his sister’s situation. “I’m afraid that Harry has also had a touch of...” he paused to arch one eyebrow meaningfully, “you know.”


“That is not my tale to tell,” Severus returned, “but you need to understand that Harry is in quite as delicate a state of mind as your sister.” He looked into his teacup, not liking the turn the conversation was taking. “Speaking of which...” he stood, picking up his tea cup, “will you tell Harry that I need a word?”

“Of course, Professor.” Bill jumped up, “Do you want me to make you something to eat? I could bring it in.”

Severus shook his head. “Tea is fine.” Slowly he made his way back to the bedroom. Once there, he conjured a second chair to sit on. He didn’t want to have this conversation from his bed.

He heard Bill thumping up the stairs. Harry’s resentful voice answering. Severus hoped that the tone was provoked by being dragged away from his friends, rather than having arguments with them. It would be much healthier at this juncture for Harry to be resentful of Severus than lose the support of his long trusted friends.

That was a new thought. Perhaps the ghost of bloody Freud had gotten lonely and started whispering in his ear.

One set of light footsteps tripped down the stairs. Harry really did walk quietly. Part of pretending he didn’t exist, Severus supposed.

Harry’s knock was timid.

“Come in.”

The door opened. Severus sighed at the sight of the child. Harry’s cheeks were pale and the corners of his mouth turned down. He looked like he had the day they’d had lunch together at Hogwarts. That seemed years ago now.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” The child’s voice was quiet, uncertain.

“Yes, Harry. I needed to talk about some arrangements I’ve made on your behalf.” Hopefully, Harry would let him get through the whole thing before throwing a tantrum. “Close the door. Sit down.”

“Arrangements,” Harry muttered resentfully, “ha.” He did as he was told, crossing his arms across his chest, not meeting his guardian’s eyes,

You’re his father, Severus, James Potter’s voice whispered in his ear, making him start. Stop playing games with yourself.”

With a growl, Severus redoubled his efforts at closing his mind.

Harry flinched a little at the growl.
Severus ignored it, in favor of getting through this conversation. “Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and I have been discussing the after effects of the Tribuo spell and your situation, especially in light of the newspaper article.”

The boy just shrugged, looking off to the side. “Whatever.”

Severus wondered what he’d done this time to arouse such hostility.

“All right,” the boy’s voice was thick with contempt, “the twins told me all about it. They heard you in the kitchen last night.”

The professor promised himself that the minute those miscreants got back to Hogwarts, he’d have them cleaning the dungeon floor with toothbrushes. All he said to Harry was, “What precisely did they tell you?”

That made Harry meet his eyes. “They said you were going to marry me off to Ginny. Without even asking me! What if I don’t want to marry her? What if I don’t want to marry anyone?” he snarled.

“But what I want doesn’t matter! No one ever cares what I want. I’ve never even kissed anyone and now I’m supposed to...to...” He grimaced, unable to continue. That fine trembling was back.

No, not the dungeon floor, Severus decided. Fred and George would be cleaning the owlery floor with toothbrushes. Their own toothbrushes. No doubt they had no idea that what they saw as good-natured teasing had been taken seriously by the Muggle-raised and ill-used child.

“Clearly, they misunderstood the whole arrangement then,” Severus said softly, trying to be unthreatening. “This contract is merely for betrothal, first of all. Not all betrothals necessarily lead to marriages. Either party might veto the arrangement when they come of age.”

Harry looked confused. “So, what’s the point?”

“One part of the standard betrothal contract allows each of the parties to be fostered by the other’s family. If it should so happen that the Wizarding world were to discover that your Muggle relatives were unfit, this prior contract would prevent certain families from petitioning for your custody.”

It would also prevent people ferreting around in the records office and finding out the truth of Harry’s parentage, Severus avoided mentioning.

“This fostering isn’t done very often anymore, you understand. Growing up in the same household tends to produce rather...ahh...sibling-like feeling between the parties.” He watched Harry to be sure it was sinking in.

“But...” The boy went bright red. “Ginny’s going to be... What if I..? And the Weasleys will get all...”

Severus was sure he knew what the boy was asking. “No one will be offended if, the minute you turn seventeen, you tell them that you feel far too brotherly towards Miss Weasley to consider marriage to her. That is the formula, you see. Conversely, Miss Weasley can say the very same thing. Because this arrangement protects you and you are my ward, the arrangement also satisfies the debt Ginny owes to me.”

The man also wasn’t going to explain to Harry that, under the contract he and the Weasleys wrote out, no matter what Harry decided, Ginny would always have similar status to a daughter-in-law to Severus, making her binding to him much more benign and appropriate. The protection this betrothal would provide could be literally lifesaving to Severus’ son. Were something to happen to Severus, Dumbledore or the Ministry would have to go through the Weasleys’ legal and Magical claim on
Harry. Ginny would always be a link between the Snape house and the Weasleys.

Harry seemed to mull that over. “I still don’t get it. How does it protect me?”

The potions master sighed. “Harry, the reason you were sent to live with your aunt in the first place was that the Ministry was going to sell your custody to the highest bidder, but as you know, the Wizarding world considers blood bonds paramount. If it is discovered that the Dursleys were unfit, Lucius Malfoy will be at the Ministry before you can blink, swooping in to provide the Boy Who Lived with a proper pure-blood upbringing.”

Harry paled. “But, why does this stop him?” The fine shiver became an all-out shudder.

“Because Mrs. Weasley will provide proof of prior claim. She doesn’t have to allow anyone but the judge of the Wizengamot to examine the document and the judges are bound with Oaths of Silence. To everyone else, the tale will be that your father provided for this betrothal out of fear that your mother’s Muggle-born ancestry would be a problem in your finding a mate. The Weasleys are well known to be Muggle-born sympathizers.”

Shamefaced, the boy said, “I should have known the twins were just winding me up.”

Suppressing a smile of pure relief that Harry hadn’t blown up in his face, Severus risked asking, “How so?”

The boy’s face flared bright red. “They said I needed to...er...give Mr. and Mrs. Weasley grandchildren.” Doubtless the twins had put it in much cruder terms.

“Ah.”

“They seemed put out when I didn’t like the idea. I think they thought I was insulting their family,” mumbled the boy.

“I shall have to remind them that Muggles view this sort of thing in far different terms than wizards,” Severus growled.

Thinking on it, when Molly heard that they’d been giving Harry a hard time about what they’d overheard, the twins would be wishing they were back at Hogwart’s before the week was out.

Severus was beginning to become quite fond of Molly.

“Sir?” Harry asked hesitantly, “Did you want anything else?”

There were a number of things that they could talk about, but none were time sensitive, “I did, but honestly...” he trailed off, feeling the now-familiar lassitude overwhelm him quite suddenly. He closed his eyes and tilted his head against the back of the chair.

The warm weight of a blanket fell on him. Dimly, he heard the door open and shut as the child slipped from the room.
Hermione and Ron found Harry where he sat cross legged on on the floor, leaning against the wall of the passageway, sometime later.

"Well?" Hermione demanded. When the twins had come in to Ron's room earlier to tell them what they'd heard the night before and give Harry a hard time, Ron had rolled his eyes but hadn't gotten particularly bothered. Hermione, on the other hand, had surprised all the boys by shouting at the twins not to talk stupid. She'd said no one civilized did that sort of thing anymore.

Harry felt the knot in his stomach begin to unclench, but not completely. "I think it's all right," he said softly.

"So the twins were just having you on? Right?" she asked slowly. She crouched to sit beside him. Ron slid down the wall to sit on the other side.

"Well, sort of." Harry sat on the floor in the passage because he hadn't wanted to go back up to Ron's room where the twins might be lurking. Bill had thrown a silencing spell on Snape's door earlier so they wouldn't bother him. "It's just...well, there really is a betrothal..."

"What?" demanded Hermione, looking outraged. She jumped back to her feet. Harry stood too, so he didn't feel like she was towering over him.

"That's...that's...You have to talk him out of it, Harry! I can't believe that Ron's parents would allow that!" Her face turned white and then red, then white again. Her voice rose in pitch and volume as she spoke. "My parents... they send all sorts of money to human rights agencies to put a stop to forced marriage in the Muggle world! This is Britain! Not... not...!" She seemed so angry that Harry thought she was going to blow up like Marge had. "You're thirteen! Ginny's twelve! That's... that's..." She seemed to lose the ability to speak.

The lone picture on the wall of the passage and the big mirror began to shake ominously. The redhead wizard in the picture looked alarmed and then hastily exited the portrait.

"It's horrible that you and Ginny should be married off like that! It's barbaric! It's like slavery!" She
was nearly throwing off sparks. Harry felt his hair rise on his head and Ron's was standing straight up as though with static electricity. "And Ginny! What's she going to think? Like she hasn't been through enough. This could be enough to send her right over the edge again!"

She stopped, took a deep breath, and the magical energy in the hallway seemed to be sucked back into her. "I bet you can get out of it, Harry." Her voice was low now, conspiratorial. "He's not your blood family. I bet he doesn't have the authority. I bet if you spoke to one of the judges on the Wizengamot..."

The bedroom door opened. Snape stood there, leaning heavily on his cane.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that perhaps Snape had cancelled Bill's charm.

"Miss Granger, lower your voice," the man said softly, his inflection almost kind.

That had her going quiet with shock more than anything. Harry blinked; the caustic potions master was using that tone more and more often.

"No one is forcing Harry and Ginny to marry." Perhaps the man was too exhausted to shout; his voice sounded rough and hoarse.

"But... but he said... he said you...!" Hermione managed to sputter.

"I realize that Wizarding law is very strange to the Muggle-born," Snape interrupted. "You must understand," he turned to Harry, "this is a legal fiction. The very existence of the contract would bind the houses of Snape and Weasley. It need not change how you live your life."

Harry finally asked the question that had been floating around in his mind for the last hour. "So... so I can... see... other girls?"

 Snape smiled. The sight was startling. If Harry didn't know better he'd say the expression was almost fond. "Girls... boys... Whomever you like. The important part is that the spell is appeased this way. Otherwise," Snape shuddered, "I am likely to find myself burdened with Miss Weasley's firstborn child."

Harry wasn't sure if he was serious or if it was that one of Snape's snarky jokes.

The man sobered in the next breath. "According to the goblins, unless something I am willing to give my soul for is offered by Miss Weasley or her family, her life is bound to mine. Should I become ill..." he stopped, sighed, "...more ill... Miss Weasley would share my illness or injury. It's possible that she is not recovering as quickly as she should because of it. I could even inadvertently suck magic from her in a parasitic way. Apparently the spell was in fact used for that several times in the last century. More than likely, if I were to become mortally injured or ill she would die at the same moment I do." He paused. "Not that I intend to die in the near future."

Snape closed his eyes, resting his head against the doorjamb. "You see, since we had no prior relationship, our magic is seeking to find a balance. Fortunately, this contract gives me something that I would trade my soul for." He seemed to be almost talking in his sleep and the children looked from one to another in astonishment.

"What's that?" whispered Hermione.

Snape eased himself down the wall. Harry recognised it as one of the man's sleep attacks. Instinctively, Harry helped the man sit down gently. He couldn't help but push his luck on this. "What would you trade your soul for?" he asked, his voice a little high pitched with his own
temerity.

Snape opened deep black eyes to look into Harry's as the boy knelt beside him. "Your safety, you silly child." The man's eyes sagged shut.

Hermione's eyes went huge. "Harry..." she whispered. "When did this happen?"

"What happen?" asked Harry blankly, not seeing the significance.

"Never mind." She leaned down to shake the professor.

Harry caught her arm, "Don't," he cautioned, while wondering how they were supposed to get the man back to bed.

"What's he doing there?" Bill came up behind them. He shook his head, looking amused. "C'mon, Professor." He reached out and shook Snape's shoulder before Harry stopped him.

The Professor's wand snapped out and pointed squarely at Bill's nose. There was a flash and Bill froze, a victim of the same hex Snape had used on Harry before.

"Umm... Professor?" Harry couldn't tell whether Snape had fully woken yet, so he scooted a little way away.

Snape blinked owlishly at them. "What, Harry?"

"Er... I think you hexed Bill."

"Oh." He pointed his wand at Bill, who staggered upon being released.

"Come on, Professor," Bill said, shaking the last of the spell off. Harry helped Bill help Snape to his feet.

"I've got him, Harry." Bill was a lot more cheerful than someone who'd just been hexed usually was. "You lot go on, now. I'll look after him."

They walked back up to Ron's room.

Suddenly, Bill shouted from Snape's room, sounding furious. "Fred! George! Get your arses down here!"

Ron grinned as the twins came barreling down the stairs. "What'd we do this time?" they heard one of them say to the other.

When Ron's door was closed, Harry told Ron and Hermione what Snape had told him.

"See, Hermione," Ron said when Harry was finally finished. Hermione was sitting on his bed, and he sat on the floor next to her with his back up against the bed. "It's fine. Harry doesn't have to worry about being stuck with Ginny. He can see who he likes."

Hermione still had her arms across her chest and that frown. "Is that all you're worried about?" she hissed.

Something about what Ron said really bothered Harry, but he couldn't think what until Hermione said, in a very low, angry voice, "Snape didn't say anything about Ginny."

"Huh?" asked Ron, looking up. He'd already gone back to reading his comic books, which were his
favored rainy day activity.

"Anyway," snapped Hermione, as if Ron hadn't spoken, "even if it is just a legality and can be broken off. Even they won't force Harry and Ginny to marry later on—it WILL affect their lives. You can't live with something like that hanging over you like... like the Sword of Damocles without it influencing your decisions. He's making decisions for Harry that he has no right to make." She turned to Harry, who was sitting cross-legged on the bed, too. "How do you think Ginny will feel, if you break it off? Do you think she won't be hurt? Knowing you, you'd end up marrying her just so she wouldn't feel rejected."

Harry tried to picture telling Ginny he didn't want to marry her, and realized he'd feel terrible.

"What's the Sword of Damocles?" Ron asked, curiously.

"Look it up," snapped Hermione, showing how upset she was by not even trying to explain the reference.

"But what can I do?" Harry asked dully. "Not as though Snape will listen to me. And won't that upset Ginny?"

"Listen," Hermione said in a calmer voice. "Didn't you hear what Snape just said? He'd sell his soul for you." She gave him the look she always gave him when she thought he was being particularly thick. She took a deep breath. When she spoke again, her voice was oddly gentle. "Harry, I don't know why or how it happened, but he clearly loves you. If you tell him how unhappy this makes you, from what you've told me, I think he's enough of a Muggle that he'll come to his senses. There has to be another way to handle it."

Harry's mouth hung open. "Don't be stupid," he said after a second. "Snape just... well he feels responsible is what it is. He's got a serious thing about his duty. Anyway, won't it upset Ginny? I don't want to hurt her feelings. Not after..." he trailed off, not liking to talk about what happened to her. It might lead to talking about what happened to him.

"I think Ginny would be relieved, honestly." Hermione leaned forward earnestly. "She's been writing to me a lot. SHE won't be ready for something like this. I'm sure she wouldn't want to do this."

Ron scoffed, "Oh, come on, Hermione. People do it all the time. Charlie was betrothed to some girl before he decided that it wasn't going to work for him. He saw lots of people, too. His betrothed was from some family that Dad worked with. Anyway, she wasn't really keen on him, either."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Thank you, Mr. Sensitivity," she sniffed. "Look, it's just not the same if you're Muggle-raised. All right? Harry, go tell him now, before this gets anymore tangled, please?"

"Hermione, he's just doing what he needs to," Harry said quietly. "He wants to take care of the spell. It's ok. I'll cope with it."

"Can you honestly say that you're happy with this?" she asked, exasperated.

"Well, no... But Ginny needs the spell appeased, doesn't she?"

"And that's your job, how?" she snapped. "If you can look at me and tell me you would honestly feel about it the way Ronald obviously does, I won't say another word."

"I..." Harry looked at Ron, who just shrugged and rolled his eyes. This whole thing was taking on the features of a nightmare. One of those where he was sliding down a hillside into a crevasse and he
couldn't stop.

"Harry, really, go talk to Snape." Hermione always made things seem so bloody reasonable.

He sighed, knowing that she was right, but he honestly didn't believe it would do one iota of good.

"What's the worst Snape would do? I really think he would listen to you," she encouraged him.

Harry sighed and stood up. "I'll go talk to him, then."

Coming downstairs, Harry heard voices from the kitchen. It sounded like Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were home.

Snape was in there too. "I would suggest you think before you exercise your tongues in the future." He sounded as cold as he ever had in potions class.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," muttered Fred and George's voices in unison.

"Bill?" 's voice sounded sharp. "Take these two to apologize to Harry and then they can get started on mucking out the chicken coop. With these."

Looking decidedly chastened, the twins walked out of the kitchen on either side of Bill. Oddly, they each held a toothbrush.

They stopped in front of Harry looking uncomfortable. "Erm. Sorry, Harry," one said, not meeting his eyes.

The other one nodded. "Yeah, we didn't mean to upset you. We just..."

"Were being stupid," finished Bill firmly.

"I... don't worry about it," muttered Harry, confused as to what they were even apologizing for. It was maybe the first time he'd been apologized to by someone for giving him a hard time. They hadn't even hexed him.

"Come on, you two," growled Bill. "That coop won't clean itself." They stomped out of the front door.

Harry took a deep breath and went into the kitchen. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sat at the table with Ginny between them. Snape sat next to Mr. Weasley.

"Erm..." Harry nearly turned around and left. He wasn't going to be able to do this.

"Harry, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, "we were just explaining to Ginny about the betrothal contract." She summoned the teapot and another cup.

Ginny looked at Harry. Her lips were compressed as though to keep from crying.

"Erm... I... er... wanted to talk about that," he whispered, sitting down next to Snape. "I understand that you're trying to protect me and everything." He spoke in a rush because if he stopped, he wouldn't finish. "But, I just don't think this a good idea. I... I couldn't just not... and I don't think I could... I mean it's not that I'm not grateful or anything... but..." He stuttered to a stop, vividly remembering Petunia ranting about his lack of gratitude. Snape was going to have a fit.

The adults were silent; the ticking clock seemed very loud as he waited for the explosion.
"Harry, dear?" Mrs. Weasley encouraged him gently. "What are you trying to say?"

He felt himself start to tremble. With a supreme effort, he began again, talking to the tabletop. "I don't think I can do this. It's not that I don't like Ginny and I know you're trying to help. I just... I just..."

Mortified, Harry realized his voice was shaking. He'd faced a basilisk, for Merlin's sake. Talking to these four people seemed to take all his nerve. He forced himself to continue after taking a few deep breaths. "I don't want to be betrothed... or anything. I mean, if there's any way around it. It's not right. And it's not fair to Ginny."

While he was speaking he didn't look up from studying the marks on the table. Now, he chanced a glance at Snape, who frowned harshly. Hastily, he looked back down.

"Is this really how you feel?" Snape asked sharply. He put his cup down on the table with more force than necessary.

Harry winced and shrank into his chair, knowing what was coming next. Snape would tell him to just get over it. He'd be told to stop his whinging and be grateful.

"I just feel like it would be hanging over me... us," he said helplessly. He wished he'd brought Hermione. He didn't know how to explain what he was feeling.

He looked at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who were staring at Professor Snape. He was glad they weren't looking at him. He felt miserable enough that he was scorning their help. They'd probably never speak to him again.

Ginny gave him a little smile. At least she wasn't angry with him; rather, she was looking as relieved as Hermione said she would.

Snape stared at Harry with narrowed eyes. He seemed to come to some kind of decision. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said at last.

Harry braced himself for Snape's next words.

"I suppose I've spent too long in the Wizarding world... I'd forgotten..." the man said softly. He turned to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. "I will have to withdraw my consent from this contract."

"Of course, Severus," said Molly gently. "Harry, we never meant to make the two of you unhappy." She wrapped her arm around her daughter. "We'll work something out."

Ginny smiled brightly at Harry.

"Perhaps there is a retroactive healer's oath I could take to renounce my claim on Miss Weasley." He sighed and passed his hand over his eyes as though it were all too much to deal with.

"So, this means we don't have to be betrothed or whatever?" Harry checked, hardly able to believe it. For the first time in his life an adult had changed a decision for no other reason than Harry didn't like it.

Snape nodded. "That is precisely what it means, Harry. I had been congratulating myself for living in the twentieth century," he smiled rather ruefully. "However, apparently I am more a resident of the sixteenth than I thought."

Harry's stomach unclenched. He was trying not to do or say something stupid, but he had to wipe a few stray relieved tears away
Mr. Weasley fished a bit of parchment out of his robe. He looked at it, then spoke very slowly. "You know, Severus, I was just going to tell you... I did as you suggested and found Eileen's inquest report. I... ah... noticed that your family had no legal representation."

Snape shook his head sharply. "There was no money for that," he grunted. "What does it matter?"

"Well, I'm certain that this verdict must have been a source of a number of difficulties for you."

Snape snorted. "One could say that."

"Well, looking at the case...You see, Auntie Muriel has an excellent solicitor." Mr Weasley looked at Mrs. Weasley, as if for support. "I imagine if we told her what it was for, Muriel would help fund an appeal."

"You..." Snape seemed at a loss for words. He cleared his throat, swallowed. "You'd be willing to get involved in that?"

Mrs. Weasley took the bit of parchment from Mr. Weasley, which she read. When she looked up again, her eyes seemed very bright. "Oh, Severus, I am sorry." She put her hand across the table and patted his hand. "Of course we can help."

"Ginny, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, "go and get cleaned up for tea, dears."

They both nodded. As Harry was leaving, Snape caught him by the elbow. "Thank you for telling me that, Harry," he said solemnly, his voice sounding a bit thick. "I know that was difficult."

Harry nodded, not sure how to respond. He headed out into the hallway.

Ginny was already halfway up the stairs. She stopped, turned to him. "Thanks, Harry," she said awkwardly. "Not that I'd hate the idea or anything... but..."

Harry smiled; he'd still been afraid she'd be mad. "Yeah," he agreed.

Hermione and Ron came barreling down the stairs as soon as they heard Ginny and Harry.

"Well?" demanded Hermione, much as she had an hour or so ago.

Ginny gave Hermione a relieved smile. "Harry got Snape to cancel it."

"Just like that?" Ron asked, stunned. "I didn't think he'd ever change his mind. He's so..."

Harry could see Ron trying to come up with something to describe him that wouldn't be insulting.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Maybe the spell made him nicer?" suggested Hermione.

Ginny shook her head. She laughed a little, "I don't think so. He went spare at Fred and George because they were teasing Harry. They're out cleaning the chicken coop with toothbrushes."
Thanks to Badgerlady for Beta-ing.

It was frightening how perilously close Severus had come to losing the boy's trust. What Molly had suggested had seemed so reasonable and expedient. It had seemed the perfect way to avoid the child's being harassed by the Ministry, and not incidentally, to keep Harry's true parentage a secret.

When Harry had come into the kitchen looking so drawn and unhappy and mumbled his way through the explanation of how he was feeling about a betrothal, it had been on the tip of Severus' tongue to tell Harry that this was the way things were done in the Wizarding world. He very nearly told the child that it was just something he'd have to get accustomed to.

"Severus. Stop." Several of the voices in his head seemed against the idea, but the words were Lily's, "He's never asked for anything before." Then, more softly, "Don't you remember what I was like the first time I'd heard about this particular custom?"

Lily had thrown an almighty fit one day when one of her Gryffindor housemates had come into school talking about the betrothal her parents had just arranged. It was in exchange for some magical debt or another.

Down by the lake, she had told Severus in great detail how it made her recoil in horror. Lily's rant had started with how her grandmother had been a Suffragette and had gone to work in a laundry when she refused to go into service at fourteen. Lily had gone on to talk about politics and unions—most of which Severus didn't follow. The upshot was that Muggles with this sort of background did NOT see betrothals as a Proper Thing To Do.

"Don't do this, Sev," she finished.

With that request accompanying it, there was no way Severus could deny the child. As sensible a plan as it might seem to wizards, the boy's Muggle background probably made it entirely unpalatable.

It was almost worth it just to see the shock in the boy's eyes. Sadly, it also reinforced the impression that no one had ever listened to the child before.

Molly was a little too easy to convince—that seemed suspicious, but the girl seemed to relax after he agreed to cancel it. Perhaps she'd had objections, too.

"Can't imagine why," Lily's voice remarked sarcastically.

His Occlumency seemed able to keep everyone but Lily out right now.

Another note came from Lupin after tea, passing on his regrets that Severus would have to stay with the Weasleys a few more days. Apparently Albus needed him for ward setting.
Severus mentioned again that he and Harry could be gone from under Molly's feet. She merely glared at him and then behaved as if she hadn't heard. Although this little veranda outside the back door of the Burrow she had conjured and that he currently was sitting on was probably Molly's acknowledgement of Severus' need for solitude that didn't require him to lock himself in the bedroom.

It wouldn't last more than a day or two—it was nothing more than a rain-repelling charm and a warming charm that had an illusion of roof, floor and windows. Arthur had informed him cheerfully that this was something Molly did when the boys were suffering from cabin fever in the winter and driving her around the bend. Sometimes she'd lock the boys out here, sometimes herself. Arthur had brought out an actual chair, side table and ottoman for Severus to use.

"It's hard to be around the boys when you don't have a retreat," Arthur said cheerfully. He'd left a tea tray and a plate of biscuits on the little side table.

Right now, Severus was using the welcome quiet to converse with Lily. Or rather get a lecture from Lily.

"You know what you need to do." Her voice was so clear that it sounded like it was coming from outside of his head. "You should tell him."

"Lily, I can't," he muttered. "It would devastate him."

"Maybe so," she replied, "but it will be much worse if he finds out for himself. His friend already said she thought only blood relatives could make betrothal contracts. She's smart enough to find out. And then she need only go to the records office."

"If it gets out, it could ruin your good name," Severus protested.

"We don't care about that."

"We?"

"James and I. I told him, not long before we died, what you'd done for us."

Severus could almost see her, sitting next to him in a chair that matched the one he occupied.

No.

He could see her. Clear as the dismal November sunset. Rather than a ghostly silver, she was dressed in a becoming green robe that matched her eyes and contrasted beautifully with her auburn hair.

"Why don't you look like a ghost?" he asked her curiously.

"Because to you I'm not one, Severus," she said gently. "A third of your soul dwells here, on the Other Side. There's no Veil between us."

That was not in his head. Perhaps he'd drifted to sleep again.

"Not this time." She smiled and rocked in her chair. After a moment, she used her wand to produce a second cup and helped herself to tea. "Although you'd be better just thinking at me—you wouldn't want to advertise that you're a Necromancer. Or to have everyone thinking you've lost your mind."

The Ministry would hunt him down like a dog if they found out about this latest thing.

"Considering that I'm fairly certain I have lost my mind," he replied lightly, although without moving
his lips, "I'm not sure it matters."

Lily smiled, but the expression was a little bitter. "Yes, but I won't have you locked up in St. Mungo's or Azkaban. Harry needs you."

"Harry doesn't need me. He needs someone who can love him," Severus scoffed. "Someone who can look after him properly. Molly and Arthur are much better suited and Harry will be much happier."

"Harry needs much more attention than Molly and Arthur can give him. Especially right now." Lily stared into the sunset. "And you do love him."

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm only…"

"Severus, don't," Lily interrupted, "It's all right if you're fond of your son." She held up a hand to stop whatever he was going to say next. "I know you never intended him to be yours. I know that you have always thought of him as James' and mine. If things were different that would be the best thing you could do." She turned to look him fully in the face. "But things aren't different. If my sister hadn't been such a hateful little bitch…" her face twisted, "If I wasn't dead. If James wasn't… If Sirius hadn't run off half cocked. If Peter hadn't sold us out to Voldemort…"

"I beg your pardon?" Severus sputtered, "Lily, you're mistaken… It was Black who gave your whereabouts away."

Lily sniffed and wiped her eyes with a white handkerchief from her sleeve. "No. It was Peter."

He shook his head. "Black confessed." Greatly daring, he reached over and put his hand on hers. It felt warm and alive under his. "When Albus visited him in Azkaban, the only thing he said to him was, 'It was my fault.'"

She sighed and sniffed. "He thinks it was his fault, but he never sold us to Voldemort. He blames himself, but it was Peter who betrayed us." She looked up, intense again. "Things have changed, Severus. You've reached a turn in the road." Her face took on an eerie spirit glow. "Tonight the traitor is revealed and everything begins. Harry needs the truth from you. He needs one person he can trust, and he'll never be able to trust you with secrets separating you."

She stood and bent down to put her arms around him. "I know you'll do the right thing, my friend," she whispered.

He returned her embrace, only to discover the next second that he held nothing.

Sighing, he poured another cup of tea.

"Professor?" a quiet voice said behind him.

"Miss Weasley," he acknowledged, wondering what the child could possibly want. He sat on the urge to snap at her to leave him be. Lily would not be impressed and he would likely never hear the end of it.

"Er…" She came around to stand in front of him.

She looked dreadful, almost swaying on her feet with fatigue. Not unlike how Severus felt. She took the chair Lily had been sitting in. The professor was startled to realize the chair was real, not an illusion Lily had created.
"I… er… I wanted to thank you, Professor," the girl said in a rush.

"For…?"

"You've been really…" she hesitated, looking for a word, "good about this whole spell thing." She looked down at her hands, then raised her gaze back up. "Bill told me… He was really worried. Mum didn't want to tell me, but Bill did anyway… He said that the best I could hope for is that you'd be willing to marry me. That way I'd at least have some rights under the law. He said that the spell could be used as a Bondage spell. I didn't think that you really would, " she hastened to tell him, her eyes wide and worried. "I told him weren't like that, but Bill thought you might want to marry me, because, well… you know…” she turned bright red, "he said that the goblins reckoned you might want an heir."

"Miss Weasley, I am very tired," Severus replied quietly, not wanting to keep having this conversation. "And, if I may say so, you look like you need to get yourself back to your bed." He addressed her as he'd address one of his Slytherins who was ill and denying the need to see Madam Pomfrey—equal parts sympathy and common sense. "I imagine this whole thing has been quite the ordeal for you. Please dismiss from your mind any obligation you feel towards me. I believe your parents and I have decided on a course of action that should appease the spell without any further disruption of your life." He stopped for a moment to sip his tea, before adding, "I apologize for leaving you with this anxiety; I honestly didn't take into account that part of the spell."

"I told Bill that you weren't like that," she repeated, her eyes wide. "I knew you couldn't be because of what you said to Death," she whispered. "Do you remember?"

No, actually he didn't, but he didn't like to tell her that. "Miss Weasley, I doubt it matters."

She stared for a few more seconds before relaxing. "No, sir," she agreed, then she said, "Erm, sir?"

"Yes?"

"I should tell you, I looked up betrothal contracts when Bill mentioned them. The book's still in my room. It said only close kin can make those sorts of contracts. And it wouldn't have appeased the spell anyway, if Harry wasn't your… your close kin." She had the good grace to blush at her own temerity. "I won't say anything to Harry, but Hermione…” she trailed off.

"Ginny?" Molly called from the kitchen. "Why don't you go have a lie down for a while, dear."

Severus sighed. "Go on child," he told her, when she rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to protest, "do as your mother says."

"Yes, sir." Ginny stood and gave him a little smile.

Molly gave her daughter a pat on the shoulder as she went past.

"You are a devious woman, Molly Weasley," Severus said as she sat down.

"Sorry?" she asked all innocence.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, realizing that she had the same deadpan expression the twins wore when they were caught out, but her eyes sparkled with the expression of triumph they had when they'd gotten away with a particularly clever prank.

"Never mind." Severus couldn't find it in him to be angry at Molly's machinations. All she's truly done was fail to remind him of things that should have been at the forefront of his mind. By her
lights, she was doing everything possible to help himself and his son.

Harry was his son.

That was the crux of everything, wasn't it?

"Auntie Muriel's solicitor just sent back an owl." Molly was unaware that Severus' whole world had just shifted on its axis for the umpteenth time since September. "She says she can take the case. The inquest was actually handled most irregularly. It's entirely possible that the confiscation of the Prince assets was not legal."

That didn't matter as much as it once might have.

"And it may well be that in the rush to settle the case, the Ministry wrongly convicted your mother."

That did matter. Severus remembered the rejection letters he'd received from various apprenticeships, unable to take him because of his family history of mental instability.

Abraxis Malfoy had finally stepped in after Severus had joined the Death Eaters to find him a Potions Apprenticeship. It hadn't been his first choice, but fortunately it was something he was very good at.

Molly was continuing, "She said that extenuating circumstances can generally be found for this type of thing. She's going to do some more research."

"Thank you. What do I owe her?" Severus asked.

Molly looked at Severus as if he'd grown a second head. "Don't be silly. Muriel's taking care of it. It's a matter of family honor now." She shifted in her chair nervously. "To that end… Muriel said she'd heard you asked for permission to bury Eileen on the Prince grounds and been denied."

Severus nodded, his insides squirming as he thought about his mother, her ashes resting in her urn on top of the bookshelf in the living room. He just couldn't bear to bury her in a Muggle cemetery.

"Ah. You know that Muriel and I are the last of the Prewitts?" Molly asked quietly.

"No, I didn't," Severus replied.

"Muriel and I… we wondered if you were still unhappy with where her grave rests… And then, well, we wondered if it was the Prince Cemetery in particular you wanted her buried in, or if you would accept any Wizarding family cemetery. We could have her moved to our family cemetery."

She paused. "If you wanted."

That was unexpected.

"That's very kind," Severus said huskily.

Molly patted his hand. "No need to decide now, dear," she said softly.

Severus felt like he was standing on an uncertain precipice. He looked at her kind eyes and asked, "Molly? How can I tell him?"

She didn't mind the rapid shift in topic. "Just tell him, Severus," she said softly, not removing her hand from his. "He'll be angry, but one thing I've noticed about our Harry is that he never stays that way. Mine? They'll carry a grudge till the next Domesday, but your boy?" She might have put the slightest emphasis on "your boy." "With him, it's a flash, then it's gone."
Severus nodded. "Things are always complicated, aren't they?" he said softly.

Molly nodded soberly. "Generally. You very likely want to get it over with, and if I may say so, while you're here." She hesitated. "I think I'm right in assuming you might need help keeping an eye on him."

Severus nodded, closing his eyes. "Yes."

"Shall I send him down?" she asked gently.

Finally, Severus bowed to the inevitable. "Yes. Just don't go far. I have an idea that he'll not be talking to me for a while after this."
Chapter Summary

Severus lets Harry in on the secret.

Thanks to Badgerlady, as always.

Hermione sat in the corner reading a book she'd found in Ginny's room while Harry and Ron played a few games of Exploding Snap after tea.

Ginny stuck her head in to give them a wan smile and a little jerk of her head at Hermione, who got up and followed her.

There hadn't been much conversation between them all afternoon. Hermione had been relieved to hear about Snape's about-face but she kept giving Harry those oddly furtive looks. He began to wonder if she might have guessed about his little hanging stunt.

Snape was still being a puzzle. There was no way he should have given in that easily, and so Harry felt on tenterhooks, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Hey, where's Scabbers?" asked Harry suddenly, realizing that he hadn't seen Ron's rat since he'd gotten to the Burrow.

Ron looked up at him and sighed, frowning morosely. "He disappeared the night Ginny… got sick… I think Crookshanks got him."

"Oh, mate. I'm sorry," replied Harry, meaning it. "I didn't know."

The other boy shrugged. "He was a bit pathetic. And after everything else… ."

"Yes, but that's rough," Harry said, upset with himself. He couldn't believe he'd been such a rotten friend that he hadn't noticed until now that Ron's pet had disappeared. He remembered how bad he felt when Snuffles was gone. An idea occurred to him. "How do you know Crookshanks got him?"

"That cat's had it in for Scabbers since Hermione got him," Ron said darkly. He glowered at the cards for a moment, before sighing, "Well, I know she feels really bad about it. It's not her fault that Sirius Black got into the tower and her cat got in too." He paused and then added more softly, "She's been good for Ginny to talk to. And we owe her a Life Debt. She's been over about once a week since we got home."

"You know," Harry said slowly, "Snuffles went missing and turned back up. Maybe all the stuff happening just made Scabbers hide?"

"Could be." Ron's face brightened a bit and Harry was glad he'd spoken. "There's lots of places for him to hide in the tower."

They played quietly for a few more minutes. Harry looked at Ron. "So how are Life Debts different from the Tribua stuff?"
Ron shrugged, throwing out a card, which exploded with a little pop. "I guess it's more ordinary, you know? Basically, it means Ginny owes Hermione her life, but it's not a Bondage spell. It doesn't make her forfeit her rights or anything."

"What do you mean?"

Ron glanced up as if to make sure no one was listening. "Bill was doing his nut on the quiet. He and Dad—they wanted to get Snape to marry Ginny so he couldn't turn her into his house-elf or something."

"Huh."

"Mum kept telling them not to worry so much." Ron smirked. "That was funny, usually it's Mum who's worrying."

Dumbledore had said something to Harry at the end of his first year about Snape owing James Potter a Life Debt and how that made the man save Harry's life. Did that mean he owed Snape a Life Debt now?

He owed the man something, he was sure.

"So, it was okay, living with Snape?" It was the first time Ron had asked outright.

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to sound offhand. "You know his dad was a Muggle?"

Ron goggled at him. "No, really?"

Harry nodded. "He's even got a telephone and a stereo at his house. He watches television too, sometimes."

"Wicked." Ron grinned. "I'd've thought he had a drafty old castle or something."

"No, it was pretty nice actually," Harry said. Once I cleaned it up, he didn't add. He threw out another card and this time his was the one to go off with a bang. "Hermione would love it, he's got books everywhere. Some of them are good. I found a copy of the *Hound of the Baskervilles.* He didn't mention *Tales of Beadle the Bard;* he wasn't going to tell Ron that he'd been reading a kid's book. That was hidden in the bottom of his bag still. He wasn't sure why he'd brought it with him; it just seemed like if he had it near, the Storyteller from that night couldn't be far away.

He knew that the Storyteller had been Snape—the man's voice was unmistakable. It just seemed so weird. Snape would probably laugh like hell if he found out how much those stories meant to him.

"Snape's really different away from school, then?" Ron asked.

Thinking of the Storyteller, Harry nodded. He wasn't about to tell Ron about that, though. "He's been different all year." He shrugged. "Neville..." he hesitated; this was the first time he'd spoken of Neville to Ron since he died. "I think Neville really upset him." That was really the only reason Harry could imagine for Snape's change in attitude towards him.

Ron nodded, not meeting his eyes. He wiped one of his eyes with the heel of his hand. Tactfully, Harry pretended not to notice.

"Harry?" Mrs. Weasely stuck her head in the door. "Professor Snape wonders if he can have a word. He's on the back porch."
Harry nodded, getting up from where he'd been sitting on the floor. At Ron's quizzical expression, Harry said, "He had other things he wanted to talk about."

The boy trotted down the stairs trying to quell the nervous flutter in his stomach.

Professor Snape was sitting on the little porch Mrs. Weasley had spelled into existence. A huge silver animal was standing in front of Snape's chair.

A deer, Harry realized. It lifted its head to gaze at him as he came out of the back door. It had huge eyes and tiny antler spikes no larger than the ends of its ears. It must be a stag, then.

The thing would have been too large for the space if it had been solid. Snape seemed to be just looking at it.

The professor looked over his shoulder to follow the deer's gaze. "Harry," he said, "come in." He turned and banished the creature with an absent flick of his wand and a muttered "Finite."

"What was that?" asked Harry, as the beautiful phantasm faded.

"It's called a Patronus," Snape said softly. "It's especially useful against Dementors."

"Oh." Harry wasn't sure what to say to that.

A second chair was separated from Snape's by an end table that had a tea tray with tea and biscuits on top of it. Snape waved to it. "Sit down, Harry." He paused a beat. "How are you doing?" His voice was soft.

A little nonplussed at the question, the boy shrugged. "Fine," he said automatically. That was the kind of question Lupin kept asking him. He'd been relieved that Lupin hadn't shown back up, thoroughly tired of the man's constant questions about Harry's feelings. Snape usually asked questions about practical or specific things.

The man turned his you're-a-bug look onto him. Something about his face made Harry very uneasy. His eyes glittered with something that Harry didn't recognize. After a minute, he realized that Snape looked almost frightened.

"That was a stupid question, I suppose," Snape muttered irritably.

Harry kept quiet, figuring it was rhetorical.

"I wanted to speak to you about a few things," Snape said, but he didn't say anything further.

The boy sat quietly, his stomach clenching. He had no idea what could be the reason for a build-up like this.

The man's face went from that weird frightened look to almost horrified. "It occurs to me, Harry," he said in a low voice, "I really don't know how well acquainted you are with... certain facts... about... well..." Snape cleared his throat. "That is to say, I have no idea what the state of sexual education would be in the Muggle world." The man's cheeks flushed to an almost painful-looking red.

Oh dear god, thought Harry, mortified. Does he want to give me The Talk? Nothing would be more embarrassing than that. Harry had listened in on Vernon's discussions with Dudley, usually when they were sitting in front of the telly and Petunia was out for the evening. That was awkward enough, but this?
"It's okay, Professor," Harry said quickly, before the man could continue. "They tell us all about that in Muggle school." That was stretching it a bit, but that was all right; Vernon had gone on at length to Dudley about not letting some girl trap him into marriage. He went on so Snape couldn't interrupt, "And the twins apologized for teasing me and I didn't really get that freaked out and since I don't have to be engaged to Ginny—I don't even have a girlfriend. Aunt Petunia… well… she said… anyway… She was pretty… erm… graphic." The boy's face started to heat up. "You know… about how my mum got herself in trouble and if I ever did that to some girl, I wouldn't need the girl's father to kill me. She'd do it for him."

Snape stared at him, with that unplaceable expression. It occurred to Harry that he actually didn't know much about the Wizarding world when it came to this stuff. He'd just found out that arranged marriages were apparently common. Who knew what other customs no one had mentioned to him?

"So, uh, yeah… I sort of have some idea of the… er… mechanics," he finished lamely.

Snape sighed, maybe in relief? "This is awkward enough," the man muttered, "without having to explain the plumbing."

"Er… what?" asked Harry, feeling completely baffled.

The professor's black eyes caught his. In the dim light of a single lamp, the man's eyes seemed bottomless. He looked at Harry very seriously before saying, "I need you to listen to what I have to say to the very end. It is something that will undoubtedly upset you."

"What?" demanded Harry, before catching himself. "Sir?" he added grudgingly, reckoning it wouldn't hurt to be polite.

Snape looked away, directing his gaze out of the windows, though it was fully dark now, "Do you remember me telling you that your mother went through some effort to conceive you?" he asked in a low voice.

Harry felt his face pale. That night, he'd babbled at The Storyteller about what Aunt Petunia used to say, not realizing he was spouting off to Snape. And then again when Snape had slipped him a truth potion. The memory of the man holding his hand gave Harry a funny, tight flutter in his chest. "If you needed a delicate potion, to whom would you go?" Snape had asked.

Numbly the child nodded. He just knew that Snape was going to tell him it was all a comforting lie, just to get him through that night.

"You should know that the trouble they had conceiving lay with James Potter, not your mother. They'd been trying for over a year. The potion I made for her… " Snape trailed off, caught Harry's eyes, then looked away again, "It is commonly used by women whose husbands are infertile." He was speaking more quickly now, as if to just get it out. "It's not unlike a Polyjuice potion. However, the effects are permanent. The woman takes it so that her child will resemble her husband rather than the child's biological father."

"So… what… ? Like sperm donation?" Harry had seen something about that on the telly once.

The professor relaxed a little, "Yes, yes, precisely." The man's speech took on the tone of voice he usually had when one of the Slytherins answered a question correctly. "According to Wizarding law, a man's wife's child is automatically counted as his magical and legal heir, unless he disinherit the child. However, your presumed father… well… given that he is deceased, only a blood relative can take custody of you without it going before the Wizengamot."
"I was the only one who could do it, and do it quietly." Harry remembered those words from a lifetime ago. His mind slowly churned into motion, as he tried to decipher what the man was trying to tell him.

"So, you're related to me somehow?" Harry said the words quietly, only then remembering some of the odd things Snape had said, especially since the whole hanging incident.

"Go to sleep, son."

"I have every right, I'm the boy's fa-"

"The boy's father."

A wild fit of hysteria nearly made Harry burst into giggles. He remembered an American film Dudley and his friends were fond of. The black shrouded villain told the hero in some climactic scene, "I am your father." As Harry remembered, it the poor hero had ended up hanging in space by his knees. He couldn't remember the rest of it.

He choked the giggles down, managing to only give voice to a snort. He looked down at his hands, took three or four deep breaths before looking back up at his guardian.

Snape sat rigidly upright in the comfortable chair; his hand was curled around the top of his cane, gripping it so hard that his knuckles were white. His mouth was a tight-lipped line.

Very slowly, feeling the need to be absolutely clear, Harry said, "So, you're saying that James Potter wasn't really my dad."

Something twisted in Snape's face. "No. I'm saying that, had Potter lived, he would have been your father in every way that counted," he paused a beat, "but since your placement was... unsuitable... I have exercised my rights as your closest living blood relative. To answer your question, I am your—your biological father. Since I have officially claimed you, you are now my legal and magical heir."

"Did... did my... did James Potter know about this?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"No," Snape said. "Although I do believe your mother told him before they were killed."

"So, you and my mother... you did some magical rite or something? And made my mother pregnant that way?" Harry's stomach was starting to tie itself in knots.

"I made the potion for her," Snape said, his eyes averted.

"So, you and my mother... you and her... ?"

The man's bright red cheeks were answer enough.

"So Marge was right," Harry hissed. The teapot cracked. "She was just a common little slag who'd sleep with anything that looked at her twice."

Snape's expression darkened to something thunderous. At any other time just his glare would have silenced Harry, but after the last month, he'd gotten reckless where Snape was concerned.

"Why are you telling me this?" Harry growled.

"It may be that, given that the Dursleys were so publically arrested, it will get back to the Wizarding world. If that happens, there would be petitions to put you with a wizard family. In all likelihood, this would get out."
"So, the whole world will know that my mother was a bloody little slut?" Harry jumped up from his chair, his fists clenched.

Snape rose too, "Don't you speak of your mother like that!" he snapped.

"Why not?" shouted Harry, "That's what she was!" His heart was racing and angry tears were leaking from his eyes. "You! You put one over on my father because you hated him, didn't you? I bet you laughed like hell. Yeah... you never competed with..." The child realized he had no idea what to call James Potter now. "With him for her affection because she was a tart just like my aunt said she was! Did you pay her too? I bet you had to pay to get her. And then when she gets knocked up you figure out some way to fix it so I look like... look like..." The breath in Harry's chest caught as Snape took one step towards him, one hand outstretched. Harry jumped away, protecting his head. Any second now he was sure that Snape was going to lash out with either that cane or his wand.

"Harry." Snape didn't move another muscle; his face was colorless. "Please, listen."

"NO." The boy was beyond reason, beyond fear. Like that night with Aunt Marge, it didn't seem like he could rein in his fury. A wind whipped up from nowhere and blew the furniture across the porch. "You have been LYING to me! Pretending that you wanted to look after me. Why didn't you just let me die? You never wanted me! You could have come for me! You left me with the Dursleys!"

"Your mother loved Petunia," Snape said quietly, "It never occurred to me that Petunia didn't return the affection."

Harry couldn't stand being here any more. He turned and tried to open the back door, and found it locked.

"Let me go." Harry yanked on the doorknob.

"Not yet," Snape said softly. "I need you to let me finish." The man's quiet voice held something more compelling than his harsh tones.

Unwillingly, the boy turned around. He lifted his chin and glared at the tall man. "There's not anything left to say."

Snape leaned heavily on his cane. He looked older than Dumbledore at that second. "Harry... listen... It wasn't supposed to be like this. I never wanted you to know."

"Of course not. You didn't want anyone to know you were fucking somebody's wife."

"Mind your tongue!" Snape drew himself up and took a step towards Harry.

"You can do it, but I can't say it?" Tired of the man's games, Harry recklessly disregarded the man's warning tone, "You and her...!" His stomach turned over at the very thought. Petunia had been right all along. Not knowing what else to do with his ire and his humiliation, Harry turned around and slammed his fist into the wall.

"Stop that. Now!" growled Snape, moving more quickly than he had been of late; he caught Harry's wrist in a firm grip, preventing him from hitting the wall again. He turned Harry around to face him. The man was much too close. Harry suddenly became sensible of the danger he was in. Vernon would have already throttled him.

"Harry. You can't keep doing this." Snape sighed, still holding Harry's wrist. "Madam Pomfrey fixed
it when she did your neck, but you'll break it again if you continue. Mrs. Weasley will not appreciate fixing self-inflicted injuries."

Dammit, Snape did not play fair.

Harry felt sick. He leaned against the wall behind him and slid down to the floor, pulling his arm from Snape's grip. He put his head on his knees and hid his face in his arms. He felt the air stir in front of him and felt a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry." Snape sounded like he had knelt down in front of him. "I know you won't believe me yet, but it wasn't like that. Your father suffered from a genetic defect that made him unable to have children. It's not uncommon in pure-blood houses. Your mother came to me for help. She was my best friend." He paused, but Harry didn't move or speak. "Think of how many wizard families have only one child. Isn't that strange, when they all value family and lineage as they do?"

Harry shrugged.

"I do have proof, should you need to see it."

The boy shook his head; it was all too much to take in. The horrible things the Dursleys said about his parents rang in his ears. "Why didn't you let me go?" he whispered.

"I will not. You are my responsibility." The man's voice sounded choked.

Finally Harry looked up. "You don't want me," he tried to snarl, but it came out as a defeated whisper. "You're just doing your duty."

Snape seemed impossibly pale, like he was going to pass out at any moment, but his voice was steady. "Love can't exist without Duty," he rasped, reaching out with one hand to curl it around Harry's shoulder.

Feeling a bit like he did after Vernon backhanded him, Harry shook his head to clear it. There was no way Snape meant that the way it sounded. "Love? What are you talking about?"

"I don't know if you can believe me… I… have grown… fond… of you, I think." As declarations went, it was weak, and the tone was stiff but for all that it was as if a small explosion had gone off in Harry's chest.

And then he pulled his hand away. "I realize that you will be much happier here, of course, and I certainly won't alter the plan to turn custody over to the Weasleys at the earliest convenience. However, I…"

That was enough for Harry. "So fond you want to get rid of me, at 'the earliest convenience'." He jumped up and crossed the little porch to the outside door. This one opened when he twisted the knob.

He ran out into the dank night, heedless of where he was going or the shouting of his guardian's voice.
Cursing himself for a fool, the Potions master summoned his cloak and Harry's. He'd forgotten about that back door. Between that and his ridiculous displays of emotion, it was becoming apparent that he was suffering some variety of brain damage.

He flicked his wand and growled a couple of charms. The kitchen door swung open with a slam. Both cloaks flew into his outstretched hand.

Molly stuck her head out, but fortunately there was no evidence of the Weasley boys, "Oh, he's never gone out without his cloak, has he?" she asked, looking concerned.

"Of course he has." Severus pulled out the pocket watch. The hand was at "Sulking" rather than "Mortal Peril" or "Mischief." A quick locus filias revealed Harry's location: "Broom Shed." Severus relaxed marginally. "I'll go get him." He thought he'd better get him before the child did something stupid again.

Molly nodded. "You'll be all right? You'll let me know if you need help?" she asked, wringing her hands a bit and staring out at the back garden. She turned back to Severus. "I'll leave a pot of tea on the table for you both. There's bread in the cupboard if you want to make some toast or a sandwich. Don't stay out in the cold all night, neither of you need that." She seemed to take comfort in practicalities, "Everyone else is in bed. I'll just get out of the way, shall I?"

"Thank you, Molly," Severus sighed, pulling his cloak on and picking up his cane.

Seeming to make up her mind about something, Molly caught Severus in a sudden hug. The man held himself stiffly for a few seconds before bending and patting the woman on the back. The last time anyone had embraced him like this was when Eileen had seen him off at the station that last Christmas.

"Molly," Severus said gruffly, "thank you."

"Don't be silly, dear. There's nothing to thank me for." She let go of him and patted his shoulder the same way Severus had seen her pat Bill's. "Now, you just pull yourself together a bit and then go on and get Harry before he gets even more confused than he already is." She pulled her wand out and produced a handkerchief that she handed to him.

Utterly mortified, Severus realized that tears were leaking from his eyes again. "I'm sorry. This is
quite...out of character." His voice was harsh. "I don't know what's wrong with me." This was getting embarrassing.

The witch's eyes were understanding. "Bill said that the books all say its rather normal to be a bit..."

"Maudlin? Histrionic? Idiotic?" Severus grated. He was able to count on his fingers the number of times he'd been reduced to tears as an adult before these past two months.

"More emotional than usual," Molly said firmly. "Minerva and Poppy are the same. Minerva told me the last time she wrote that she can't get through a day without sitting down and crying at least once. And the things that come out of her mouth... Remus says she swears like a navvy." Her voice dropped to a confidential murmur. "I suspect she's taking advantage of it, though. Remus tells me she shouts at Dumbledore every time she sees him and puts it all down to the spell."

Horrified, Severus realized that he really did know very little of the Tribua spell's effects. He couldn't believe he'd used it without so much as a second thought. That was no doubt why Bill had been so shocked—it was just such a Gryffindorish thing to do.

Molly was going on, again giving him one of those encouraging pats of the shoulder. "Poppy said that the fits will pass soon, you just need to recover your strength. Hopefully, now that we've balanced the spell, that will happen a bit more quickly."

He really hoped so, or else how was he going to teach classes when he was apt to break down into laughter or tears at the drop of a hat?

There was nothing to do for it now.

He lit his wand so he didn't trip over anything in the garden while he went to the shed. He made no effort to be stealthy, so perhaps Harry could be forgiven for not realizing it was he.

"Fuck off, Ron," the boy hissed as Severus opened the door. "T-tell your mum I'm f-fine," Harry chattered. It was freezing in there and all Harry was wearing was his jumper and jeans. In the dim light Severus could see the boy, sitting on a box, facing away from the door. He had his arms wrapped around himself and he was shivering.

Quietly, the man slipped into the shed, put his wand into his pocket and draped the cloak around Harry's shoulders.

The child gasped in surprise and jumped away, turning to face him. He dropped the cloak onto the floor.

"Harry," Severus sighed, leaning down to pick it up, "it's cold out here." He sat down on the box, holding the cloak out.

Eyes huge with trepidation, the young wizard reached out for it. Seeming as though he was waiting for it to turn into a snake or explode, he held it as though he didn't know what to do with it.

Severus sighed again. He stood, took the cloak back and handed his cane to the child. Shaking it out, he wrapped it around the youngster's shoulders.

Harry didn't say a word as Severus retook his cane and sat down on the box again.

"Do you know," Severus began contemplatively, "when I was about your age, my mother put a silencing charm on me for a whole week?" He smiled a little at Harry's rapt attention. He wondered if the child had always hung on his words like this, "She heard me call some girl a slag. I couldn't
speak unless spoken to at all, and then only to give an answer. She told me that if I ever spoke of a witch that way, being silenced would be the least of my troubles. " He paused for effect. "I imagine Mrs. Weasley would have something to say about that sort of language used under her roof."

"Oh..." Harry sucked in a distressed gasp, "She didn't hear me, did she?"

Severus shook his head. "No. But I don't want to hear you say such things again. Especially not about your mother." He took the tone he generally did when issuing detentions. "I'm not above casting a weeklong silencing charm on you. I found it was quite effective in teaching me how to curb my tongue. AND it would allow Miss Granger ample time to explain in detail how offensive those words are to witches and Muggle women alike."

Perhaps this was the wrong time for it, but Severus felt he really needed to talk about both the language and the misconceptions implicit in the words.

"I realize your aunt and uncle said dreadful things about your parents and you were only repeating them, but you will not speak so again, do you understand?"

"I'm sorry." Harry whispered. An automatic response: Severus doubted he really meant it. The boy was exhausted and the upset of the day was wearing on him.

He showed how tired he was the next second by dropping to sit on the floor, taking the posture he'd had on the porch, with his arms folded on top of his knees and his face hidden in the folds of his cloak.

"But why did she do it?" he asked, sounding defeated.

Severus leaned towards the child, putting his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on his fists. The inner prompting that he now realized was indeed Lily's coaching told him that he needed to reach out to the boy, but with the utmost caution.

With all the care that he would use when handling petrified cobwebs or incendiary potions ingredients, Severus placed his hand on one of the child's. It was exceedingly cold—he needed to coax the child into the house, but they needed to get some things out into the open first. "She wanted a child, Harry. She would have gone to any length for you, as indeed she did when she faced the Dark Lord." He was encouraged that the youngster didn't pull away.

"Why didn't you take me, then?" Harry asked forlornly into his knees.

Severus sighed. "There were many reasons. Not least of which is that I... would not have been a fit guardian."

The young wizard mumbled indistinctly into his arms.

"What was that?" Severus said, scooting forward so that he was almost knee to knee with him.

"You wouldn't have been as bad as the Dursleys," Harry said with more volume, although he didn't raise his head.

"No. But I had no way of knowing that."

"Severus," Lily's voice ordered him, "you need to explain. Better than that." Having her in his head was going to be damned inconvenient, he could see. He hoped she had better things to do than spy on him all the time.
"Harry. Please. Look at me."

After a hesitation, Harry looked up. His eyes were very red and he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Sitting on his urge to find a handkerchief for the boy, Severus said very seriously, "My father was little better than your uncle and he often hit my mother as well as myself. He had a wicked temper and an evil tongue. I knew I was no fit father for anyone. I think my treatment of you and Mr. Longbottom in the classroom will attest to that."

Eyes huge, Harry hesitated then spoke slowly, seeming to be thinking his way through something. "You've been really good since this whole thing began, though," he offered as if to appease his guardian. "You got me clothes and glasses and everything." Unconsciously he pushed the glasses up the bridge of his nose with his free hand. Interesting that the boy should try to console Severus when ten minutes ago he was furious with him. Molly was correct about his temperament—that had to come from Lily. Severus himself had carried grudges for years.

"That is kind of you," Severus replied, feeling profoundly sad. "Clearly a testament to your guardians' ill treatment if you consider my bungling to be 'really good.'" His voice was bitter to his own ears. "It has only recently been made clear to me how very... wrong... my approach has been."

Harry tilted his head to the side as though having trouble following.

"I never intended to take custody of you... You see... I did not wish to become my father. It is not a reflection on you at all. I had thought..." He stopped, closed his mouth for a moment to organize his thoughts. Harry made no more move to interrupt than a class full of his seventh year NEWT students would have. "I was aware that there was ample money to take care of your material needs. If Petunia was not an unnatural shrew they would have been met, as would your emotional needs. I was willing to assume the world was ordered the way I wanted it to be. I was willing to pass off my obligations to someone I deemed more fit, without ever bothering to verify the matter for myself" Severus looked away from the boy, ashamed. "I fear I have become my father in many ways."

The admission was a knitting needle through his heart. Only as he said it did he realize how true it was. He might not be a drunk, but his foul temper and vitriolic tongue damaged those around him quite as much as his father's drunken rages. His neglecting to even check on Harry was far worse than anything Tobias ever did.

"You and Mr. Longbottom. I'm afraid you both brought out the worst in me," Severus said, still looking away from the child, but the smaller hand under his own had not been withdrawn. It was tensed to pull away, but for now the boy allowed the contact. That had to be an encouraging sign. If he wasn't getting through, Harry would be on his feet and out the door again. Retreat was one of the boy's major survival strategies. "I think I saw in you both some reflection of myself. And you? Had you been any other student, I would more than likely have thought to look for the underlying reasons for your behavior. As it was, I only thought you had everything I never had; how dare you behave like I did?"

"I don't understand," Harry said.

"No. Of course you don't." Severus felt stiff sitting here and, as they had been since he used that blasted spell, his emotions were far too close to the surface. "It's cold out here. And it's late. Everyone else went to bed." With a groan, leaning heavily on his cane, Severus stood.

He held out his hand. After a bare hesitation, Harry took it and pulled himself up.

"You're still far too cold. Come here." Severus pulled the boy to his side, draping his cloak and his
arm over the child's shoulders so that his cloak covered them both. The man had a vivid memory, suddenly, of his mother doing the same to him when they were out together in the Wizarding world. Severus always thought it was because they could never afford cloaks with warming charms on them. Now, though, he remembered the amazing feeling of security it gave him when he was small. He drew the child closer to him so that his arm fully encircled those thin shoulders, feeling the small body stiffen, then relax.

As they walked back to the house, Severus realized that the boy's trembling was not shivering from cold. Harry was using his sleeve to wipe his face again, although he made no sound. As on the night Severus had comforted the child during his long crying jag after he'd shouted at Dumbledore, his weeping was very quiet. No doubt the result of being told to shut up his noise or else be given something to cry about.

In the light of the kitchen, Severus saw that Harry's face was awash in tears. "Here," he said quietly, producing a handkerchief. Harry took it with a small murmur that was probably a thank you.

If he was going to keep needing this many handkerchiefs, Severus reflected, he would start buying disposable tissues.

Molly had left the teapot on the table with a warming charm and the kitchen was toasty, soothing Severus' aching joints. With a tired groan, the wizard took off his cloak and sat.

Harry cleaned up, splashing his face at the sink. He took off his own cloak, hanging it and Severus' on the cloak tree before he came the table. By this time Severus had the tea poured.

"Are you hungry?" Severus asked solicitously.

Harry shook his head.

Severus chose his next words carefully, pitching his voice to be as reassuring as he could. "There is far too much we have not yet discussed. I would like to do that now. However, I need your word that I will not have to chase you down again. I am very tired of this game we've been playing. Clearly it is long past the time for this conversation."

A sort of noncommittal grunt was the answer.

That wouldn't do. "Harry, I need your word. Otherwise, I swear I will stick you to that chair." Severus allowed his voice to creep towards the stern one he used on people who melted cauldrons.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied meekly.

That was probably the best he was going to get.

He rubbed his eyes, propping his elbows on the table. When he looked up, Harry was staring at him as if he'd never seen him before. Questions were forming in the back of the child's eyes, but he was biting his tongue.

"What is it?" asked Severus as gently as possible. He clasped his hands together and gave the child his full attention.

The boy flinched. A second later he squared his shoulders and raised his chin. "So... when are you planning on getting the Wizengamot to let you get rid of me?" He seemed to be going for a defiant tone—and failing.

Severus shook his head. "I told you, we can transfer your custody to the Weasleys at the earliest
convenience. We need only speak to one of the judges privately."

Harry looked away and took a deep breath, looking displeased about something. The only thing Severus could think of was that it wasn't soon enough for the child. "There's no reason you can't stay with them now, if you like." He strove to make his voice gentle and non-threatening. "I only brought you to my home in the beginning because... well..."

"Ginny." Harry glanced back at him, then away again, his hands clasping his teacup and looking into it as though trying to read the leaves.

"Precisely. I was attempting to sort out a way for you to stay with them permanently that wouldn't involve the Ministry, but since that proved impractical we'll have to..." Severus trailed off. The child was doing it again, sniffing and trying to pretend he wasn't. They were a fine pair. At this rate they were going to end up drowning themselves in salt water. "What is it?" He tried not to snap.

"I just... I don't..." Harry sputtered as though he couldn't formulate what he was thinking. "What if I don't want to go to the Weasleys?" he finally whispered.

Severus opened his mouth and shut it again, not quite understanding what the child was saying.

After a moment, he said, "Well... I'm not at all sure who you would prefer." Perhaps the Grangers? He wondered if it was possible that the Muggle-raised child might not be as comfortable in the Wizarding world as they'd always supposed.

The child just sighed sadly.

Using his most persuasive voice, Severus said, "Please, Harry. I'm trying to help. You need to tell me what you're thinking."

"You could keep me." The child's voice was barely more than a whisper.

Severus stared for a full minute, feeling like someone had just cast a confounding charm on him.

"Sir?" Harry's concerned voice finally brought him out of his stunned silence.

"Why on earth would you want that?" Severus finally asked, blankly.

The boy looked much younger than thirteen at the moment. Short and skinny, although he had put on some weight and was no longer drowning in his clothes, he looked like a Dickensian waif. Still not looking up, he gave a jerky shrug.

It wasn't often in his life that Severus felt completely baffled—this was something he'd never even considered. Perhaps Molly would have some idea of what bizarre impulse might have prompted this request.

It could be that with the child's overdeveloped sense of responsibility, he felt that the Weasleys' plate was too full. It was even possible that he felt that he needed to look after Severus. Certainly, that whole housecleaning thing pointed that way.

"Harry...?" he prompted, when it became clear that the child wasn't going to say anything further.

"Never mind." The boy firmed his chin as though he'd taken a major blow but was determined to bear up underneath it.

That was just too much; when Harry's green eyes met his, he silently incanted Legilimens.
The images from the boy's mind were confused and full of conflict. Foremost in them was the night of Harry's unsuccessful hanging: the ginger allspice scent of Severus' robes, the feel of Severus' hand and the sound of his voice. The feel of a book in the bottom of the boy's bag that meant security.

Unsettled, Severus cancelled the spell. Nervously, Harry averted his eyes and fiddled with his tea cup.

"We certainly don't have to do anything you don't want to do." Severus tried to think his way through the impressions he'd gained from the child's mind. He was feeling grateful to Severus for the saving of his life and, being thirteen, he was easily swayed by such things. "If that's what you prefer, of course you can stay with me." The child's gratitude was encouraging in that it meant that the boy was less likely to do anything rash at the moment. Severus himself had been resentful of his own rescuers for weeks.

"Really?" Of his own accord, Harry sought Severus' gaze, searching his face for something.

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it," the Potions master said stiffly.

Harry nodded.

"You can certainly change your mind," Severus assured him, knowing the child would change his mind when he was feeling less vulnerable. "Nothing is irrevocable right now." Wryly, he added, "Given that we both seem to be in the custody of the Weasleys currently, perhaps it's of no great matter."

The boy returned the smile.

"That being settled, for the moment, perhaps we can move on to other things?" Severus said gently.

"Like what?" The wizard supposed that the child couldn't be blamed for his apprehension.

"I fear that since you have rejected the betrothal idea, this could get... messy. If the Dursleys' arrest comes out, there will be petitions for your guardianship." Severus said nothing of the potential for violence against Muggles that might follow. "There are quite a few old families that can claim some distant relationship to the Potter line."

Another thing Severus wasn't going to mention: the Malfoys, the Blacks and the Lestranges could all claim kinship. Fortunately, the Blacks and the Lestranges were out of the way. Lucius, on the other hand, would love to get his hands on the child and it would not be the first time a Malfoy had bought a judge.

"If that happened, the records would be examined and the change in guardianship would possibly be leaked to the press. I may be able to have the records sealed due to your presumptive father's family name, and we can claim some relationship through our Muggle ancestors. You are not the first child conceived this way, nor will you be the last."

"What?" Harry looked shocked.

"I told you, Harry. It's a genetic trait common in pure-blood houses. Most witches of pure blood are carriers, and many of the wizards who can conceive are also carriers. If there were not Muggle-borns and half-bloods, we would die out in a few generations. Most of the Wizarding families with several children have a Muggle relative in the recent past."

"Oh." The boy rubbed his eyes under his glasses with one hand. He looked drained and grey.
There was one more piece of business to discuss before he sent the boy to bed. "I received a phone call from a social worker before we left Spinners End. Your cousin was taken into care as well."

Harry paled at the mention of his cousin. "He's okay, isn't he?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, and fortunately for us he has supplied ample details of the Dursleys' treatment of you. The English authorities feel that the written affidavits from us and your cousin's testimony are sufficient for now. They might, however, need a statement from you in the future."

Harry's brow wrinkled. "What did Dudley say?"

"He told the truth. Actually, according to the social worker, he didn't seem to understand that the treatment you received was in any way abnormal. He told the authorities that there was something deeply wrong with you and his parents had to lock you up. He then described how you lived in a way that left no doubt that you had been abused."

"Oh, but..." Harry began.

Severus held up his hand to forestall the maddening claim that the boy never really experienced abuse. "Harry, please. We can argue that later, if you don't mind."

Harry nodded, looking chastened.

"Your cousin has asked for permission to contact you. He'd like to either be allowed to speak to you in person or phone you."

Harry shook his head. "Not if I don't have to. Not right now."

"I thought as much. I told the woman that it was likely you would feel that way." Severus hesitated. "I did tell her that he could write to you."

"Assuming he can write," Harry muttered. "Wait, how can he write to me? Wouldn't he need an owl?" Tiredly, he folded his arms on the table and put his head down on them.

"No. Letters addressed to Hogwarts generally find their way to the school even from the Muggle post."

"Oh." The child's muttering sounded half awake. He'd done this once or twice in class this term. Severus supposed he hadn't been sleeping since Longbottom's murder.

Severus sipped at his tea, watching the child doze off. By the time he'd finished, Harry was breathing slowly and evenly. It seemed a shame to wake him. A quick charm made the child light as a feather so that the tall man could pick him up. A little maneuvering and Severus had the youngster arranged on his hip so that he could use his cane for balance and carry the child with one hand. There was no way he was going to carry the boy upstairs tonight, so Severus just took the him to the bedroom he was sleeping in.

He hoped Molly wouldn't be bothered by his transfiguring the chair into a small bed. A switching spell and Harry was clad in his pajamas.

He tucked the child into bed. "Good night, son," he whispered.
Harry didn’t reply and didn’t move out of the corner he’d tucked himself into.

“Come on, Harry.” That was Ron. Harry couldn’t see them from the niche he was sitting in, and they apparently couldn’t see him. “What are you in here sulking for, anyway?” Ron went on frowning in puzzlement--Harry could hear it in his voice.

“Not sulking,” Harry called back, still not moving. He sounded rather pathetic to himself. He cleared his throat, tried again, “I’m just thinking.” He thought that was almost a normal tone of voice.

“Yes, well, think inside. It’s cold out here,” Ginny snapped.

It was cold out. It was the first morning that the garden had been covered in a blanket of frost. The sky was clear for once, but that only seemed to make it colder.

Ginny sounded like she was starting to shiver, her teeth chattering a little bit. “I’m going in. Professor Snape’s not going to be happy if he has to drag you in.”
Harry wasn’t cold. When he woke up that morning in the spare bed in Snape’s… his guardian’s… his father’s (Christ, what was he supposed to call the man now?) room, he’d dressed quickly, trying not to think too hard about how he’d gotten into his pajamas. He really hoped magic had been involved rather than being undressed like a baby. As it was, he was embarrassed enough at the dim memory he had of being carried to bed. That was twice now, as if he were three.

The professor and Mrs. Weasley were sitting talking quietly when he went into the kitchen. He’d stood awkwardly with his hands in his pockets, not looking at either until Mrs. Weasley had served him up some breakfast that she put in the spot next to Snape.

While it was closer than Harry would have liked, it was good because sitting next to the man meant he didn’t have to meet his eyes.

He ate quickly, not listening to the two adults talk until they mentioned the Wizengamot. Harry looked up sharply, but neither one looked his way. Mrs. Weasley said something about the Prince family and Harry relaxed, realizing they weren’t talking about him.

When he heard the rest of the house moving around upstairs, he’d stood abruptly. Oddly panicked at having to talk to Ron or Hermione, he’d muttered, “I need to...I’ll be outside…”

Snape turned his head quickly and fixed him with a sharp stare. “You remember the agreement we had?” He frowned.

“Agreement? Sir?” Harry asked distractedly, and then, “Oh.” His face flushed with uncomfortable heat. “Yes, sir.” He remembered he’d given his word that he would tell someone if he felt like doing something stupid. He fully expected to receive a lecture right in front of Mrs. Weasley.

Snape stared at him with narrowed black eyes. Harry had that feeling that Snape was reading his mind again. After a second he relaxed. “Off you go, then.” He turned his attention back to his breakfast.

Surprised, Harry had put his plate in the sink and had turned to leave when both Mrs. Weasley and Snape had said, nearly in stereo, “Don’t forget your cloak.”

“Erm, yeah.” He’d grabbed the cloak from where it hung and made a quick getaway just as he heard several Weasleys thunder down the stairs.
So, he’d spent the entire morning in the broom shed, but at least he wasn’t cold.

Ron said something to Ginny that he couldn’t catch. The broom shed door closed. Before Harry could get his hopes up that they’d all gone, Hermione said in a hesitant voice, “What did Professor Snape say that’s got you so upset?”

“Nothing,” Harry replied.

“You can’t hide in here all day.” Hermione’s footsteps came closer; she stepped around the set of shelves Harry was sitting behind.

“Not hiding,” Harry muttered, putting his head down and not looking at her. He knew he was acting like he was three rather than thirteen, but right now he wasn’t up to putting up a good front.

Hermione pulled up a box and sat down, wrapping her cloak around herself. She didn’t look cold at all and he wondered if her cloak had warming charms, too. “Harry?” she said cautiously. “What’s wrong? Don’t tell me ‘nothing’. Obviously something’s got you worried.”

“It’s...” He couldn’t say it out loud. His insides squirmed at the thought of explaining to Ron and Hermione what Snape had told him. They’d think his mum was...what Marge had called her.

But how long before they found out anyway?

Ron sat down next to Hermione. “Snape wasn’t too hacked off at you last night, was he?” he asked very seriously. His voice dropped low, “He didn’t bring you out here to give a good hiding or...?”

His cloak didn’t have a warming charm by the way he was wrapping his arms around himself and scooting up close to Hermione. Cloaks with warming charms must be expensive (Snape hadn’t let Harry look at the receipts when they went shopping), and with all the Weasleys it seemed that their cloaks were the basic ones that Harry had bought himself his first year.

Hermione elbowed Ron hard in the side and gave him a glare. Harry realized he’d not really taken in the question properly.

“Ow. What?” Ron scooted away from her and returned her glare. “I was only...”
She frowned fiercely. “You can’t just ask somebody something like that,” she hissed.

“What? Why not? Harry can tell us.” Ron turned back to Harry, trying to look encouraging. “Can’t you? I mean...” he faltered. “See, the thing is,” his face started to turn red and he seemed to steel himself, “after Neville, Dad said that the Ministry’s really started to take reports about this kind of stuff seriously where they haven’t before. So if he’s...well...not as good to you as he should be...I bet he’d listen to Mum and Dad if they told him he’d get in trouble.” Ron was very careful not to say anything insulting about the man even while accusing him of mistreating Harry.

“No. It wasn’t anything like that,” Harry said honestly. Although the way his mouth had run on last night he’d have deserved it. He felt a little offended that Ron would think that Snape was like Uncle Vernon. Then he was surprised that he cared. “He really did just want to talk. I just...didn’t like what he had to say.”

“What did he say?” Hermione asked patiently, “You can tell us anything. Is it...” she hesitated, “Has it got to do with the betrothal? Did he change his mind?”

“No. It’s just...” Harry wasn’t at all sure he could tell them anything. Anything might include what happened at the Dursleys’, or his attempt at hanging himself, or the truth about his parents. He really didn’t think they wanted to hear any of that.

The broom shed door opened again. “Harry?” It was Snape.

The three of them started at the voice. Harry jumped up, accidentally thumping his head hard enough to see stars on the shelf above the box he was sitting on.

“Oww!” That was almost as hard as Petunia would hit him.

“Oooh, mate! That looked like it hurt!” Ron said.

“Is it bleeding?” asked Hermione.

There were flashing lights in front of his eyes for a moment. He pushed Hermione’s hands away as she tried to look.

“Are you all right?” Snape demanded sharply.
“Yes. Fine.” Harry’s eyes watered as he reached up to feel a goose egg swelling on the top of his head.

“Hold this, Granger.” Snape handed his stick to Hermione. “Let me see.” With surprisingly gentle hands, Snape probed the lump. “What am I to do with you? Youngest Seeker in a century and yet you can’t seem to get through a day without injuring yourself.” He didn’t sound like he was annoyed with Harry, despite his words. His voice was low and soft: almost his Storyteller voice. It seemed like he was teasing Harry a little, but not in a mean way. Mr. Weasley sometimes spoke to his sons like that.

That thought brought a lump to Harry’s throat. “It’s...it’s not anything really,” he said thickly, bending his head as Snape examined him.

“I’ll be the judge of that, if you don’t mind,” Snape replied, almost absently.

Hermione and Ron were looking worried, standing to the side of him where he could just see them. Harry didn’t know why they were so concerned. “Aunt Petunia usually hits me a lot harder than that when she gets me with the frying pan,” he said dismissively.

Hermione’s little intake of breath and Ron’s sharp “What?” made him realize that he’d just done the opposite of reassuring them.

He tried to backpedal. “I mean, most of the time she misses, but its not really any different from getting a Bludger to the face, is it?” He turned his head to look at them.

Something in both Ron’s and Hermione’s faces seemed to say that it was different. Ron looked horrified and Hermione a little green.

Before Harry could work out what to say next, Snape left off probing the lump, his hand coming to rest on Harry’s shoulder and giving it a brief squeeze. “I’m sure the three of you can discuss this after lunch.” Turning away from Harry, he took his stick back from Hermione. “Thank you, Miss Granger. Come along, all of you.” His casual tone seemed to break Hermione and Ron out of their staring.

Wondering how he could get out of conversation with these two, Harry trailed after the professor, catching up after two steps, while Ron and Hermione walked behind, talking in whispers.
Very quietly, Snape said, “It would likely do you some good to confide in your friends, but please impress upon them the need for discretion.”

Harry glanced sidelong at the man, “I don’t want to talk about it. Especially not to them.” The boy hunched his shoulders under his warm cloak and stuck his hands in his pocket.

Snape’s profile was harsher than usual; the man’s nose and cheekbones were jutting out more than they were before. It was hard to judge when he was wearing robes, but Harry thought he was getting too thin. However, he seemed to be walking better, his gait not so unsteady.

“It’s not good to cut yourself off from them. I think they sincerely want to help you,” the professor said, still in a low voice.

An ache of loneliness made a cold lump in the pit of Harry’s stomach. He missed the easy talks he used to have with them. Ron and Hermione had been the only friends he’d ever had and the closest thing to family he knew. He’d never had anyone else. The thought made him feel very pathetic and alone.

He looked at the Potions master again, thinking back to last night. It suddenly seemed very clear that the man couldn’t arrange his own life; how dare he try to tell Harry what to do?

“It’s none of your business, Father,” Harry hissed in a whisper, his anger flaring up out of nowhere. “You haven’t given a toss in twelve years, so I don’t need your advice now.”

Harry knew as the words left his lips that he’d gone too far. Snape seemed to stagger as though he’d taken a physical blow. The wizard caught himself, turned to the others and snapped, “You two. Go inside. Weasley, tell your mother we’ll be up in a minute. I need a word with Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s breath hitched in his chest. Snape hadn’t called him Mr. Potter in weeks, and for some reason it hurt.

One look at Snape’s face had Ron nodding and making off to the backdoor.

Hermione hesitated. “Sir, what...?” She rocked from foot to foot, glancing at the house as though...
afraid to leave Harry alone with Snape..

The man’s black eyes glinted with rage. “Miss Granger, I wish to speak with my ward privately. For once in your life, mind your own business.” Snape’s voice rose to the one he used when someone spilled something in class. When she hesitated another second, he snapped out, “Do as you’re told!”

She gave Harry one more worried glance and scurried up to the house.

Snape closed his eyes, seeming to struggle with himself.

A panicked part of Harry realized that that he had ruined his chance to get the man to keep him, but he couldn’t understand why he had asked him to in the first place.

He took a step away from Snape. He didn’t know why he was pushing the man. It was as though his internal censor had just stopped working--perhaps that damned truth potion was still in play. No, it was more likely his death wish. Last night the professor had shown remarkable forbearance, but Harry could see that wasn’t going to be the case today.

The silence stretched for a long time, while Snape stood with his eyes closed. When he finally opened them, he took a step forward to close the distance between them. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw him start to raise his hand.

Harry could have easily dodged the blow but at the moment he felt he’d earned it. He set his teeth and closed his eyes, waiting for a swat around the ear or a slap to the face for his mouth.

“Harry.” The hand settled on his shoulder again. “Stop that.” Snape’s voice was tired. “I keep telling you, I will not strike you.” He paused, sighed as Harry opened his eyes. “I don’t know what it will take for you to believe me.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he blurted out the first thing in his head, “Why not?” It wasn’t as though the Wizarding world was against corporal punishment. He’d seen Mrs. Weasley swat Ron or the twins once in awhile when they got mouthy with her. Okay, so he’d gotten the idea that Snape wasn’t going to beat him like Vernon did, but Harry couldn’t believe that he meant he’d really never raise his hand to him.

The hand on his shoulder didn’t withdraw. “Because I will not become my father.” Snape’s eyes
were red rimmed, like he hadn’t been sleeping, which seemed strange because the man did very little other than sleep. “Clearly, I am far too much like him as it is.” His voice was heavy with some emotion Harry couldn’t identify.

“The next time you use the word ‘father’,” the professor held Harry’s gaze with his tired eyes, “should you indeed ever decide that you want to, I do not want it flung at me as invective.”

The unwonted sadness in his tone suddenly made Harry feel about three inches tall. It would have been better if Snape had used his cane.

Ashamed, Harry hung his head, looking at his boots. He noted that this was the first November he could remember that his feet weren’t freezing. He’d just always taken for granted that from November to April, everybody’s feet were cold all the time. Even after he’d started Hogwarts, it hadn’t occurred to him to buy boots, since they weren’t on the list.

Every time they got into one of these confrontations, he noticed yet another thing the professor had done for him, something unnecessary. For some reason, those unnecessary things caught his attention. They felt wrong. Well, not wrong exactly, more like they were strange and unsettling.

He didn’t want Snape to be kind to him, he realized. Somehow the cold, snarky Potions master was easier to deal with than the guardian who kept making sure that Harry was looked after.

Just like in first year when it was easier to believe that Snape was out to get him rather than Snape being out to protect him.

On the heels of that epiphany, Harry also realized Snape had been on the receiving end of one of his tantrums almost daily in the last month and not once had the man done more than stop him from hurting himself. Doubly ashamed now, he wished the ground would just swallow him up. “Sorry,” he whispered. “I...I shouldn’t have said that.” He didn’t look up.

“Yes, well...” Snape trailed off, making an irritable noise in his throat. He seemed about to say something else, but then he appeared to change his mind. The hand on Harry’s shoulder squeezed. “That’s neither here nor there. Isolating yourself is...” he seemed to search for a word, “...unhealthy.”

They were still talking about his friends? “I...they...What if they find out?” Harry asked in a strangled whisper. He wasn’t sure which part of the whole mess he was referring to. He’d kept secrets from everyone for so long, it was second nature.
“If they are truly your friends, it won’t matter.” That smooth voice was so certain, Harry could almost believe it.

Of course it would matter. How could it not? Harry didn’t say that, he just shrugged and looked away.

“Listen to me,” Snape’s voice was low. “I don’t want you to...

“Professor?” Bill called from the back door, cutting him off. “You’ve got an owl. Looks like it’s from Professor Dumbledore. It’s marked as ‘Urgent’.”

“Of course it is,” Snape growled deep in his throat. “What does the old fool want now?” he muttered, turning towards the house. He paused, seeing that Harry was just standing there still. “Come along, then.”

Harry followed.

Sandwiches were already on the table and everyone else was already eating. Snape went and took his letter from Mrs. Weasley. Harry took the professor’s cloak and hung it with his own. He slipped in between Ron and Hermione in time to see Snape break the seal on his letter and shake it out. Whatever was in there made his lips tighten. “Damn the man,” he swore softly.

That didn’t sound good. This impression was confirmed when he held the letter out for Mrs. Weasley to look at. She made a face as though she’d bitten something sour. They both left the kitchen, speaking in the passageway where Harry couldn’t hear them over the noise in the kitchen.

“What happened?” Hermione asked. Ron paused in his wolfing down of his lunch to look at Harry, and Ginny was on the other side of him and it was clear her ears were perked up, too.

Harry shook his head. “Nothing.” Hermione glared at him disbelievingly. “Well, he told me off for being cheeky,” he corrected himself.

“What did you say to him?” asked Ron, his eyes wide. “I haven’t seen him that scary since last year.” He took a bite of his sandwich and then asked, “Does he want you to clean the coop now?”
He grinned, nodding at the twins who were being uncharacteristically quiet and looking very put upon. “I expect Fred and George could do with a hand.”

Harry smiled a little, shook his head. “No, he just sort of told me off and then...I don’t know...just told me not to do it again.”

“That spell really did something to him, then?” Ron asked in a low voice. “Bill said it would. I heard him talking to Mum and Dad the other night, before you got here. He just didn’t know if it would be a good change or a bad one.”

Harry nodded. “Yes. I mean, he’s still Snape.” He was careful not to say anything insulting about the man, not at the Weasley table, “But he’s been different since that whole thing.”

Ginny suddenly looked very pale. “Excuse me.” She stood abruptly.

Hermione gave Ron a nasty look. “Ginny?” she asked tentatively.

Ginny smiled at Hermione wanly. “I think I need to lie down.”

“Do you want...?” Hermione started to scoot her chair back, but Ginny shook her head. She practically ran to escape the kitchen.

Harry felt his face heat up. He couldn’t get through a morning without upsetting people. He should have known better than to talk about Snape in front of Ginny.

Hermione looked over her shoulder after Ginny, biting her lip “They say near-death experiences can really change people,” she said quietly.

“Near Death?” Ron shivered; he also was looking over his shoulder at Ginny. “From what Bill says, he wasn’t just near Death, he had a bloody conversation with Him.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione, turning back around. She picked up her sandwich and started to nibble at the edge of it as though her appetite had suddenly gone.
“Bill told me...” Ron looked around to make sure no one was listening. Bill was saying something to Percy about work and Fred and George were deep into a debate about how long it was going to take to finish cleaning the coop.

“Bill told me that this spell lets you talk with Death. You have to offer Death a piece of your soul, don’t you?” He spoke in an almost awestruck voice.

“Ridiculous,” scoffed Hermione sharply, in a high-pitched voice. Her face was pale and she looked frightened. “I read about it when Mum took me to Diagon Alley last week; we went to the library there. Someone has to donate some of their magic, but it’s like when you donate blood or maybe bone marrow. There’s nothing supernatural about it.” The last sounded as though she was trying to convince herself.

“You what?” Ron turned to stare at her. “What do you mean, donate blood?”

“Well, you know, when someone’s lost too much blood they can use someone else’s to replace it,” Hermione explained patiently. “They do it at the hospital all the time.

Ron’s stare turned horrified. He looked at Harry as if to confirm Hermione wasn’t having him on. “So, they have you drink it? That’s...”

Hermione rolled her eyes and pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “Don’t be stupid. They put it into your veins.”

“Oh, my god. I’m glad I’m not a Muggle.” Ron looked sick.

Hermione huffed impatiently, “Oh, for goodness sakes, it’s not that bad. Anyway, the Tribua spell operates on the same principal, doesn’t it? The donors donate a piece of their magic.”

Ron shook his head. “Not just some of their magic, their soul.” He said the last word with some awe. “They had to trade some of their soul for Ginny’s”

“Oh, come on,” Hermione sniffed. “It’s not like death is a person you can bargain with. That’s just a fairy story.”
Harry thought of the Tales of Beadle the Bard. There was a story in there about meeting Death. As Hermione said, though, it was just a fairy story, even if it was a Wizarding story.

“Anyway, Muggles bring people back from clinical death all the time,” Hermione went on earnestly. “That’s why they teach CPR. Mum got me some books all about it. And we found a documentary about it. They say people have all kinds of strange visions when they have a near-death experience. So, obviously Professor Snape had something like that happen.”

“You’re not serious?” It was Ron’s turn to scoff. “Bill said this spell hasn’t been used in Britain in fifty years. You mean to tell me that Muggles learned to do it somehow?”

“Of course they don’t use spells,” Hermione returned scornfully.

Harry tuned them out as they started to bicker about Muggle medicine and spellwork.

Snape came back out to the kitchen, stopping at Harry’s chair. “A word, Harry?” he snapped.

Wondering what he could have done wrong in the last thirty seconds, Harry followed him back into the bedroom.

Snape closed the door with a little click and sat on the chair. “Apparently I am needed at Hogwarts today. I may in fact be a day or two, according to the headmaster,” he said with a grimace, “And honestly, I worry that I am imposing upon the Weasleys. So, I’ve decided I will be going back there to stay until school opens.”

Harry’s stomach had turned and the little lunch he’d eaten suddenly felt far too heavy. He leaned against the closed door and crossed his arms.

“Stop that,” Snape said softly.

“Stop what?” He wasn’t sure he could take another one of his own meltdowns, but his heart was already speeding up along with his breathing. He remembered then that he left the kitchen this morning without taking his potion.
It might have occurred to Snape too; he looked sharply at Harry’s face. “This is not a ruse to abandon you, Harry.” Snape used his Storyteller voice then. “I merely wanted to know if you preferred to stay here or to join me at Hogwarts tonight. The headmaster said the wards were firm enough for that.” He waved at the chair opposite him. “Sit down. Please.”

Shakily Harry sat. “I-I don’t know what’s wrong with me. This is stupid.” He leaned forward and put his head in hands. “I must be mental.”

“Accio potion,” Snape said. Harry heard rustling and the soft slap of a bottle against a hand. Some shifting of the chair until Harry felt the man had scooted over to sit almost beside him. A muttered spell and the two chairs turn into a couch so that they were indeed sitting beside each other. Then Harry felt a hand around his shoulders urging him to sit up. Harry did so, turning to meet the man’s eyes.

“You’re suffering from quite understandable anxiety,” Snape said, his voice low. He hesitated, his mouth twisting, as though he didn’t like what he was saying. “When we return to school, I want you to at least attempt to speak to Lupin. He’s been trained as a mind healer. Also, I think I must insist you attend Professor Burbage’s group.”

Lupin had said he was the school counselor to Mrs. Cook, Harry suddenly remembered. He must be like a wizard social worker. That would be why the man kept asking all those uncomfortable questions. No way in hell was Harry going to talk to him. As for talking with a group, that was completely out of the question. It’d be all over the Prophet before he could blink.

Snape shook the vial a little impatiently.

“You do think I’m mental,” Harry accused. “Is this going to make me spew out whatever you want to know?” he asked resentfully.

Snape’s mouth quirked up at the corner. “I promise that this one is merely slow poison.”

The man hadn’t gone back on one promise he’d made yet, and the potion he held looked like the one Harry had been taking every morning since that night. He decided that it wasn’t likely to be spiked with anything else, so he took it and swallowed it down with no more protest.

He relaxed as the potion slowed his heartbeat and settled his stomach. He smiled lopsidedly at their
He hoped Snape would let the Lupin discussion and the idea of joining Burbage’s group go for now. Given how he seemed to dislike the man, he was surprised to hear Snape encouraging him to confide in Lupin.

Snape took his hand off Harry’s shoulder and leaned back on the couch. “So, can we get through this conversation without further incident?” he asked tiredly.

“Erm, yessir,” muttered Harry, feeling embarrassed now, as well as ashamed of his earlier outburst. He also realized that it had been very good to have the professor’s arm around his shoulder. Bereft of the support, he hunched in on himself, hugging himself as though he were cold.

Snape closed his eyes and Harry wondered if he was going to fall asleep. After a moment he opened them again. “I don’t think you’re ‘mental’, by the way. Merely overwrought and depressed. It will pass.”

Ha, thought Harry, as if he knows anything about it.

Unbidden, the memory of the long scar on Snape’s arm came to mind.

“So...er...you’re going back to Hogwarts?” asked Harry awkwardly.

“Yes. I had thought to bring you back with me, but I’m wondering what you’d prefer to do? Stay here until school starts or stay at Hogwarts?” Snape asked just as awkwardly. “Apparently school will be opening in the next few days. The issue of security has been resolved, according to the headmaster.”

He was asking Harry? It would be a good way to avoid talking to Ron and Hermione, and for some reason, being away from Snape somehow felt...scary.

He wasn’t going to admit that, though. “Whatever,” he said, shrugging.

Snape watched him through narrowed eyes. “In that case, I’ll have you Floo to Hogwarts after
Again with the questions. Why didn’t he just tell Harry what he wanted him to do and be done with it? Not sure what the right answer was, the boy nodded guardedly.

“Will you be all right until then?”

“Yes, sir.”

More staring, like the man was going to crawl inside his head.

Something occurred to Harry. “Why couldn’t we Floo from Spinner’s End?” he asked.

Snape gave a thin smile. “I prefer to hide my home from wizards and Muggles alike.”

“Oh.” That made sense if you were a paranoid Potions professor, Harry supposed. Or...maybe Snape was ashamed of where he’d come from? Perhaps he didn’t like it generally known he wasn’t a pure-blood wizard.

“Professor Dumbledore was adamant that he wanted to see me right away.” Wearily, the professor stood. “I’ll see you later,” he said, picking up his cane and bag.

“So, er...you’ll be back for me then?” Harry said, just to check. “Tonight? After dinner?” He stood up and the couch sprang back into the two chairs it had been.

The professor nodded, gave Harry another one of those searching looks. He hesitated, then said in a soft voice, “If you change your mind, that’s also fine.”

Harry nodded, looking away. He felt like he ought to do or say something. Instead he stood with his hands deep in his pockets.

Once again Snape stepped forward, raising his hand, and once again Harry flinched. The wizard didn’t say anything about it this time, he just hesitantly settled his hand on the boy’s arm.
Harry looked up at the tall man’s careworn, thin face.

“It will get better, I promise,” Snape said.

Harry shook his head, looking down so Snape wouldn’t see the threatened tears. He could see that Snape was really trying to be kind, so why did it hurt so much?

He stiffened as the man did the most unexpected thing possible and drew Harry into a hug.

Like the night he’d shouted at Dumbledore, the contact seemed to make something inside him break. The threatened tears turned into a torrent, although Harry clenched his teeth and held his breath to keep in the sobs. He couldn’t still his shaking and the tall man patted his shoulder and said, “Shh, it will be all right.”

Harry could count on his fingers how many times someone had held him like this. It was like he’d seen at the playground or primary school when someone’s dad would console them.

After far too brief a time the man let go. Harry wiped his face with his sleeve and didn’t look up.

Someone knocked, making both of them start.

“Severus?” Mrs. Weasley called through the closed door, “You haven’t had any lunch. You are not leaving this house until you eat something.”
Feeling oddly bereft after Snape left the house, Harry made his way up to Ron’s room, where he, Hermione and Ginny were all gathered. Ron and Ginny were playing a game of chess on the little table while Hermione sat on Ron’s bed reading a thick tome called Magical Contracts: An Introduction to Reciprocal Magic.

The other three glanced at each other as he came in. Harry threw himself onto the bed he’d been sleeping in.

“So, what did Snape want?” asked Ron in a would-be casual tone. He kept his face turned towards the board and took one of Ginny’s pawns. She wasn’t paying much attention to the game; rather, she was biting her lip and looking worriedly at Harry.

“Dumbledore wants to talk to him about something. He wanted to let me know he was leaving, but he’s taking me back to Hogwarts tonight. I guess school is reopening soon.” Harry shifted the pillow around to prop himself against the wall. Idly, he thought he’d better pack. He’d only brought a few books and a couple of changes of clothes that Mrs. Weasley had laundered, so it wouldn’t take much time.

“How come he’s taking you with him?” asked Ron. “Why can’t you stay here?” He looked up from the game, his brows pulled together, then he turned back to the board and sighed with exasperation. “Are you planning on making a move, or are you just going to stare at it?” he asked Ginny rudely.

She started, seeming to need to tear her gaze away from Harry. “Shut up, Ron.” She looked at her pieces, which began yelling advice at her.

Harry wasn’t about to tell them that it was his choice; they’d think him out of his mind. “I think he wants to make sure I don’t get into any more trouble,” he replied offhandedly.

Ron’s worried expression gave way to a little half smile, as if he found that reassuring.

After another few seconds of dithering, Ginny moved one of her rooks. Ron immediately took it. Ginny scowled at the board and crossed her arms.

“Any more trouble?” Ron asked, sounding interested. “Have you been getting in trouble since school closed?”

Harry mentally kicked himself. “No, not really... not as such... Just, you know,”” He trailed off, not sure how to explain what he’d been going through. “Just the usual stuff.”

Ron nodded sympathetically. “It must’ve been boring, all on your own.”

Trying to think of something innocuous to say, Harry said, “Snape did think I was a house-elf the first couple days we were there.” That was almost funny now.

“Why would he think that?” Ginny asked, tilting her head to one side.

Harry smiled a little. “You know how he keeps falling asleep? He never realized I was the one doing all the cooking and cleaning because he couldn’t keep awake for more than ten minutes. He said that house-elves had followed him home before and he just thought one had done it again.”

Ron gave Harry a funny look. “You clean as well as a house-elf?”
He shrugged. “I guess. Dumbledore thought so, too. Then Dumbledore accused me of using magic to clean,” he finished resentfully. That still rankled—in fact, thinking about Dumbledore at all made Harry’s stomach sour with anger.

“Fred and George do, if they think they can get away with it. That’s why Bill keeps going out to check up on them,” Ron replied reasonably.

“Well, I didn’t.” Harry sniffed, feeling insulted. He crossed his arms across his chest. “I don’t need magic to do a little housework and put a kettle on.”

Something must have been off in his tone. Ginny and Ron looked at each other uncomfortably. “You must have been doing a lot more than putting the kettle on for him to think it was a house-elf,” Ron said slowly. Ginny scowled at him. “Well, he must’ve done,” Ron told her defensively.

“Snape’s been pretty out of it,” said Harry, feeling a little desperate to change the subject again. It seemed like there were no safe subjects.

“Where did he think a house-elf came from?” Hermione looked up from her book, “I thought only big estates had house-elves. Like the Malfoys.” Harry realized he hadn’t thought of that.

“Well, from school, of course,” Ginny replied matter-of-factly, turning to her. “Who else do you think does all the cleaning?”

“There’s house-elves at Hogwarts? I didn’t know that. I’ve never seen one,” Hermione said in surprise.

Ron shook his head. “You’re not supposed to see them, are you? Not unless they need to do something for you. Mum would love one, but Auntie Muriel’s got the Prewett manor, and the house-elf goes with it. Mum says Muriel needs the help.”

Hermione nodded, looking unsatisfied about something.

Again the three glanced at each other. Wordlessly, both Ginny and Ron nodded at Hermione.

“Harry?” Hermione said sounding tentative. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” snapped Harry, bracing himself for a Hermione-style interrogation. She was probably going to ask if he was losing his mind or something. He’d been waiting for weeks for her to ask about his meltdown in the train station. The truth was, he was pretty sure he was crazy, no matter what Snape said about that.

“Erm... Ginny and I... Well, Bill gave her this book because it had a bit on the Tribuo Vita spell and I’ve been reading it and... well... we were wondering…” She started to turn red and she looked at Ginny and Ron as if for rescue. “We were wondering if…” she trailed off, biting her lip.

Ginny looked at Ron and nodded at him. He shook his head at her. “Don’t look at me,” he said stoutly, “I don’t reckon its any of our business,” although he looked back at Harry with an odd expression.

Ginny just ducked her head, looking away from everyone.

“What?” Harry demanded.
Hermione drew in a breath and on the exhale asked, “Did you know you’re related to Snape?”

Harry went cold. “What?” he tried to stall a little. “Why would you ask that?”

“Well first, because only a blood relative can arrange a betrothal.” Hermione’s voice was still soft but it had that tone of surety she had when she was absolutely certain of her answer. “Second, because I looked it up. Only a blood relative can take over custody without a hearing.” She stopped. There was more—Harry could see it in her eyes—but she faltered and bit her lip.

Ginny and Ron stared at him, as though trying to gauge how he was taking her words.

He knew they wouldn’t ridicule him (probably), but their pitying looks would be much worse. Marge used to call him “that little bastard” sometimes, saying that an overdue wedding didn’t change the facts. How she would laugh to discover that his mother’s husband wasn’t actually his father.

He sucked in his breath and said, “Yeah…he told me.” His voice didn’t sound like his.

“So…what’d he say?” asked Ron when Harry didn’t go on, belying his earlier none-of-our-business attitude.

“I…” Harry’s stomach turned over. Mortified, he realized that the damned potion was failing on him again.

“Harry? You all right? You don’t look good.”

He stood up quickly and fled to the bathroom before he spewed all over the bed.

He didn’t throw up this time. He sat on the bathroom floor, calmed his breathing, and the nausea passed.

Ginny yelled for Mrs. Weasley.

The three of them were just outside the door by the sound of it. “He looked just like that at the train station when he thought we were taking him back to his aunt and uncle’s,” he heard Hermione say in a low voice. “My mum said it was an anxiety attack.”

“All right, dear. I’ll look after him,” Mrs. Weasley replied. “Harry, dear?” she called, knocking on the door. “Are you decent?”

Harry just sat with his back up against the wall and his eyes closed. “’M alright,” he muttered.

After a moment she said, “I just want to check on you, all right?” A soft alohomora and the door opened and shut.

Mrs. Weasley’s cool hand pressed up against his forehead.

“You’re all clammy.” Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. “I daresay you’ve had too much excitement these last few days.” In a softer voice still, she said, “Does this have anything to do with what Professor Snape told you?”

His eyes snapped open. She was on one knee in front of him so she could look him in the face. Her expression was kind and concerned, but there was no pity in it.

“You know what he told me?” he asked in a strangled whisper, angry again.

Mrs. Weasley sighed and brushed Harry’s damp hair back from his forehead. She summoned a
flannel and poured water on it from her wand. Then she sat down on the floor next to him pressing it to his forehead.

“Professor Snape told me all about it,” she said. “I’m sure it must be very hard for you to hear right now.” Very gently she nudged him to lean against her.

“He said that he...He and my mum...” he trailed off, unable to say it out loud. “W-why would she do that?” Harry demanded, scooting away from her.

“Listen to me, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said slowly. “You have to understand, your mother loved James Potter. His parents had been killed by the other side just after the wedding and James was the last Potter.” She hesitated. “He was also in a dangerous job. If he died, the Potter name would die out. He... wanted to have a child.”

Harry didn’t get what she was trying to say for a minute. Then, “Professor Snape said he couldn’t have kids.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded. “Yes. It’s one of those diseases that runs in families. So your mother asked him to help her.”

“That’s what he said.” He felt wrung out. He squeezed his eyes shut. Mrs. Weasley put her arm around him again. He gave in to the gentle pressure against his shoulder, gradually trusting his weight to her.

After a few moments, he felt less fragile.

“Better now?” she asked kindly.

He nodded, shamefaced.

She stood up, waved her wand and muttered, “Finite.” Harry realized she’d had a silencing spell up. “You need to get packed now. Professor Snape said he’d be back by half past six.”

“Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said in a rush, looking up at her. “Did you really put in to adopt me?”

She turned to look at him, her face very gentle. “Yes. We did.”

“I…” He had to take a breath around a lump in his throat. “Why?”

She sat back down on the floor. “Because we’d love to have you.” She raised her hand to stop him when he opened his mouth. “You can come to us any time... but... you know, Professor Snape and I talked it over. He said he thought you and he should have some more time to get to know each other, if you’re willing?”

Harry nodded, relieved that the professor had told Mrs. Weasley that it was his idea that Harry should go back to Hogwarts. He didn’t like to think that she’d be hurt.

She beamed, looking pleased. “I’m so proud of you that you’re willing to try.” She glanced at the door, then said, “Perhaps getting to know your... your mother’s cousin would be a good thing then?” She winked. “He’s obviously not as close as your aunt, but he’s still blood, now isn’t he?”

Harry stared at her, confused.

She rolled her eyes (she looked exactly like Fred and George when she did that—like they did when they were trying to get you to go along with a prank but you weren’t cottoning on fast enough), then
patiently tried again. “You know, I realize it must be rather shocking to discover that your
grandmother and Professor Snape’s father were brother and sister?” she said. “The Ministry wouldn’t
have those records, and I understand there was a Muggle war when your grandparents were young.
Many Muggle records were lost, you know.”

The penny dropped.

“Oh...yeah.” He looked at the door, too. “It...It’s an awful shock. That makes him sort of my uncle,
right?” He said it a bit more loudly than he intended.

A small noise of comprehension, so faint that Harry wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard it came from the
other side of the door.

Suddenly life seemed a lot easier. Snape had said something about saying they were related through
Muggle relatives if the whole mess came out. This way his friends wouldn’t have to lie for him.

“Yes, I think it does.” Mrs. Weasley nodded, smiling. “I think your Uncle Severus wants some time
to get to know you properly.”

Something Harry had been wondering for days crossed his mind. He asked before he could lose his
nerve, “Why is he so different now?”

“Different how?”

“He always acted like he couldn’t stand the sight of me before and now all of a sudden he’s almost
nice.”

The witch sighed, her face becoming very serious. She said, “People are complicated. He and your
mother were very close, from what I understand?”

“Yes, the lady next door said he and my mother were inseparable.” Harry couldn’t help but sneer the
last word.

“Grief is...strange,” Mrs. Weasley told him quietly. “Sometimes we get angry at people who survive
because we’re so angry at the people who didn’t.”

Harry nodded; this he could understand. “Yeah, my aunt always told me it should have been me that
died.”

Mrs. Weasley went white as a sheet. “Harry! Don’t ever say that!” she said, sounding fierce.

Harry flinched at the sound of her voice. Reflexively he ducked his head and raised his hand as he
always did when someone made a sharp movement too close to him.

There was a little silence. Slowly Harry looked up at Mrs. Weasley’s face. “Oh, Harry.” Her eyes
were very bright. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean…” She blew out her breath and shook her head. “Never
mind, love.” She brushed her hair back from her face and stood up again.

Harry scrambled to his feet.

Mrs. Weasley reached into the bathroom cabinet and pulled out a bottle of potion and a little
measuring teaspoon. She poured some out and held it for Harry. “Professor Snape said you could
have some of this, if your stomach got upset,” she said.
Harry nodded and took it, grimacing a little at the taste.

She gave him a watery smile. “You know, I think that part of the reason Professor Snape has never really wanted to know you is that he reckoned that there was no chance he could have you with him. Sometimes, if we want something we can’t have, we try to convince ourselves that we don’t really want it.”

He thought he understood that.
Unexpected Intelligence

As always, thanks to my beta Badgerlady!

A fire was burning happily in the grate when he Flooed into his own quarters at Hogwarts—much bigger than was strictly necessary. Severus stepped into the warm room, automatically brushing the ash from his robes and looking about his familiar quarters with relief to be home.

The house-elves had been busy, the stone floor shone and the window looking out onto the lake bottom gleamed. The dim green light danced eerily over draperies and carpets that looked as though they’d been taken out for their first cleaning in over a hundred years. Belying Molly's fear that he wouldn't get anything to eat if she didn't feed him, a tray with a teapot and sandwiches that someone had thoughtfully ordered sat on the table.

This didn't look good. The Old Man must be really up to something.

A note confirming Severus' thought sat next to the teapot:

Severus,

I understand how very difficult things have been for you lately. I can only hope that I can begin to make up for it.

When you’ve had a chance to refresh yourself, please Floo to my office and we can discuss the most recent developments.

Albus

Severus sighed and brushed his hair back from his face with one hand. The old coot must need some huge favor if he was going out of his way to be that conciliatory.

If he didn't need his job and Dumbledore's support so bloody much…

But, you don't need his help anymore, a voice in his head reminded him.

He made his way to his bedroom to pick out some fresh robes. He was going to pick up the child at half past six and it was nearly three now. He’d have to tell the headmaster to be brief, or they'd both face the wrath of Molly Weasley.

"Snape?"

Severus jumped, whipping out his wand to train it on the source of the voice. He knew precisely whose voice that was. Before he'd even fully focused on the intruder he'd shot off a nonverbal stunner.

The jet of red light went right through the chest of the far-too-solid-looking James Potter.

"Sorry, Snape." The dead man held his hands up at shoulder height with his palms out as if to show that he had no wand. His face was very grave and held no mockery. Indeed, if Severus didn't know better, he'd say James Potter looked actually remorseful. "I'm sorry."


Another jet of light, this one dark purple, passed through the other wizard, whose form shimmered...
but, although Potter backed up, he didn't leave or disappear. "No." His voice was flat and certain now. "Not until you hear me out."

"I don't care what you've got to say!" Severus snapped. "Get out!" He clenched his fist and sent more jets of light against the apparition, trying various banishments that were equally ineffective.

"Severus," a different voice said from behind him. "Please. Stop."

He stopped. He was frozen and powerless against that voice.

"No." He whispered, shutting his eyes. His wand hand dropped to his side and he hung his head. "Please. Just go away."

"Severus," breathed the voice, his name a benediction. He felt his clothes stir as the woman brushed by him to stand in front of him. Two small hands settled themselves on his shoulders.

For a long moment they stood like that while Severus ran through a series of Occlumency exercises. The other person never moved her hands or stirred. If she were living, Severus would have been close enough to feel her warm breath.

Finally, he felt steady enough to raise his head, meet the woman's dark eyes.

She smiled up at him. He was startled to realize he was taller than she was now. He had gained several inches since his seventeenth year.

"Severus." Again she spoke his name, as though she had no other words in her.

"Mother," he whispered. He kept his back straight and his face impassive. He would not break down in front of Potter, who still stood gawping at them.

Eileen seemed to search Severus' face. She turned to James Potter. "I assume you have somewhere else to be?" she asked him coldly. "I am quite able to fill him in on the particulars without help."

The phantasm seemed to blush. "I...I...ah...Yes. Yes, ma'am." He backed away looking sheepish. "I'll just..." he waved his hand vaguely. "Ah...I'll be around." His expression was that of a schoolboy scolded by a teacher. He faded out.

It occurred to Severus suddenly that James Potter looked very young. Hardly more than one of the teenagers he taught on a daily basis. He realized that he had outlived his rival by more than a decade.

Dismissing that thought, he looked back down at the woman who stood in front of him.

She wore robes of blue trimmed with green, with her black hair loose down her back. She looked younger than Severus remembered her, less careworn.

He was the same age she had been when she had died. She had been married right out of school and he had arrived promptly six months later. So young to have a child and to be disowned by her family.

She stared up at him with a hungry expression, never taking her hands from his shoulders. "You look so tired," she finally ventured, softly, "haven't you been sleeping?"

The statement was so incongruously prosaic than he started to laugh: a harsh, bitter sound. "No, Mother," he ground out, when he got the better of himself, "I haven't slept well since the headmaster and my Head of House told me that you'd murdered yourself!" He swung away from her, laughing
mirthlessly again. "Or perhaps since Father told me that he'd found you stone dead in the living room by your own hand and that the Ministry had been there to tell him that they were taking what little magical inheritance we were due. Given that you didn't care much for my welfare then, I fail to see how my physical health can possibly interest you." He crossed his arms against his chest and looked steadfastly away from her.

"I'm sorry." She spoke softly into the silence, crossing the room on feet that didn't quite touch the ground, he noticed. "I…" She stopped, looked down. "I thought you'd find the key I left you."

The money she'd carefully hidden so that she might leave him without guilt.

"How could you?" he rasped, looking at her, finally.

"I…I don't know," she admitted. "I had planned to merely leave Toby. The war was…frightening me. People…pure-bloods had been killed for marrying Muggles. Their children…" she shuddered. "Their children were being targeted. I thought you and I should get right out of the country before things got very bad."

Severus had heard rumors of such atrocities, but he had assumed his place in Slytherin was protection enough.

She was going on, "After my father died, I took the money out of his vault and sent it to Switzerland in dribs and drabs so that the Ministry wouldn't be alerted to large amounts leaving the country. The goblins told me that was safest." She paused, looking thoughtful. "Abraxas Malfoy started talking to me again, after Father died. He invited me to tea that week. He wanted to see how you and I were getting on. He was very impressed with you, you know." Eileen smiled wistfully. "I hoped perhaps his connections could get you an apprenticeship on the Continent. Do you know, Abraxas and I were engaged at one point? He broke it off when he met Clotho. But he was always good to me; even after I married Toby, he used to send me owls."

Yes, so good to her that he walked the other way when he saw her with her half-blood spawn in public.

Eileen's gaze became sharper, more present. "I went to see Abraxas and then...well...I'm not sure what happened. It just seemed like everything came crashing down on my head. The idea of just not being…" She sighed. "It made so much sense. You would have my father's money. Your father would find a wife who could make him happy. You would finally be free of my stupidity." Her eyes filled with tears and she sniffed.

Meanwhile, the hair on the back of Severus' neck went up. "This only happened after you saw Abraxas?" he asked in a low voice, her story striking an uneasy note.

She blinked. "I...yes. Well, no. I mean…" She stopped to gather her thoughts. "I'd thought about it before, of course. But not like this. It just seemed to make sense. I took the box to Mrs. Cook and I…" She paused, wrinkling her eyebrows in thought. "I found that potion in my hand and, well…" She looked away.

Severus blinked, his thoughts suddenly racing. "You killed yourself with Glove Cleaner." It was a highly restricted and complicated poison. Untraceable, save if the container was found in the victim's hand, as it was with Eileen. They called it Glove Cleaner because it was said to have been invented by a man who'd first invented an irreversible love potion. He had wanted to get rid of the wife whom he'd married for money. The love potion formula had been long since lost, but the poison still could be found in certain dark grimoires. "Where did you get it?"
She shrugged, looked away. In a small voice she said, as if to herself, "That's the thing. I don't know."

"Are you saying that Abraxas..?" Severus demanded, his heart speeding up.

She shook her head and then spoke as though addressing a child. "I wasn't in an Imperius dream where throwing myself from a window seemed like a good idea and I just forgot to catch myself. Imperius can't be used to make someone kill themselves. I mean...not with that as the express intent." Her dark eyes were still cast down to the floor. "I just realized suddenly that everyone would be better off without me. I knew in my heart that I was the reason everyone's life was so..." She stopped with a sound like a sob, then she swallowed, continuing with an obvious effort. "Imperius doesn't work like that."

"Not normally, no." Severus said, "But in someone who is already struggling..." He stopped, thinking through this new piece of information. "Someone who is already somewhat... off balance...can be compelled to commit acts of outright suicide." One of the problems with Eileen's suicide was that, from her note, she had clearly understood that she was doing. "They only need the right push and to be given the means..." Certainly Imperius could cause someone to take a dangerous potion home with them.

"I'll have to speak to the solicitor," he said slowly. "Perhaps there is a record of your meeting with Abraxas Malfoy?"

Eileen shrugged and gave him a little smile. "I owled some things to Switzerland before I...well, before... You might find something there. Just a few notes I wanted to make certain you or Toby didn't read." Shifting uncomfortably, she said, "There's some letters to Abraxas."

Severus nodded. He'd need a plausible way to bring the meeting to the attention of the Ministry without divulging that he was dabbling in Necromancy. Whatever evidence he produced needed to be very concrete.

"You have a son, Severus," his mother said suddenly.

"Yes," he replied, heavily. He wasn't sure how she would take the whole mess, but apparently she had already been told.

"I'm sorry. I was not a good mother to you," she said softly. "I hope you can be better than I."

"Mother," Severus did not want to be audience one of her self castigating soliloquies, "you were fine."

She held up a hand, suddenly looking very ghostlike indeed. "No, love. No lies between us now. I failed you." Her eyes were swimming. "You're right, I have no right to judge your life. But I needed you to know that I'm sorry."

To that he could say nothing. He wasn't sure even how he felt about Eileen standing here, apologizing, but something shifted within him. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, opting to say nothing rather than indulge in histrionics.

She smiled again as if in understanding and then spoke more urgently. "We needed to talk to you before Dumbledore did," she said. "Everything's changed. You and the child will be in horrible danger. The Dark Lord's servant is returning to him...The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid."

"Black?" demanded Severus.
"Not Black," Eileen told him impatiently. "Black was innocent. He was a reckless fool, but he was innocent of this crime, at least. The traitor was Peter Pettigrew."

"Lilly said that," Severus said slowly. "But what…?"

A knock at the door interrupted them. "Wait a moment," Severus called.

Eileen shook her head. "I better go. But listen to me. Sirius Black has been protecting the boy since term began. Don't let your old rivalries…"

"Rivalries?" Severus hissed, appalled. "He tried to kill me when I was sixteen!"

Eileen looked stricken. "I know. I should have done more but right now he can help you with Harry." She was wringing her hands and looking at the door. "I have to go."

"Severus? It's Minerva," called the person on the other side of the door.

Eileen faded away to mist. Severus shook his head sharply, vowing to continue that conversation later.

"A moment," he said again, irritably. He'd been hoping for time to shower, but instead he opted for a quick cleaning charm and a glance in the mirror. He wasn't nearly as disheveled as he would be after spending all day in the lab, so he supposed he was just fine for meeting with the headmaster.

He opened the door to his colleague. "Minerva?" he gasped. She looked almost as ghostly as his mother had. Where her hair had sported a white stripe, it was now entirely stark and snowy. She was thinner than ever and she seemed nearly transparent.

But she smiled at him as she never had before, her entire face lighting up.

"Severus!" she said warmly, striding into the room and shutting the door behind her. Before he knew what she was about, she had her arms around him in a hug of greeting.

He stood there stupidly, his arms dangling at his sides, until she let go of him. She backed up to look at his face, her eyes going somber as she took in his confusion.

She let go of him with a strangely regretful little smile. "Poppy told me you and Harry had been sent away alone, without even a house-elf to help you. I'm so sorry, dear. I feel terrible that no one told me. I certainly would have insisted that Albus send someone."

Damn these women.

Severus closed his eyes, employing all his self control. It would do no good to shout at Minerva and he was too tired to throw a tantrum, anyway. After a deep breath he opened his eyes and said in his iciest voice, "I fail to see how that's any of your business, madam."

The woman flinched at his tone, then lifted her chin. She was as tall as he and she gave him that forbidding look that never failed to make him feel as if he was still fifteen years old. He thought she was going to retort angrily but instead she said, "I wanted to thank you for your help with Miss Weasley, Severus." Her voice was much more formal now, but it still contained that confusing note of warmth he had never heard directed towards him before.

"Whatever." The word was Harry's but it fell from Severus' lips before he had time to think of it.

She suddenly sagged, as though exhaustion had caught up with her. "May I sit?" she asked, looking
unsteady on her feet.

Severus lifted his wand and summoned two chairs from the sitting room. She collapsed into one and he settled into the other one.

Minerva had not failed to notice that she had still been invited no further into his home than the foyer. Her only comment was the wounded look in her eyes.

A few of Toby's choicer epithets crossed Severus mind. How dare she act so surprised that he wasn't immediately fawning at her insincere apologies?

"Severus, Dumbledore wants to speak with you because he's found Sirius Black," she said after a moment. "Under rather mysterious circumstances, too. I wanted to go with you, in case...well...just in case."

"If you must," he said slowly, wondering what her game was.

"That's a wonderful idea, Professor!" Potter's ghost was back, grinning like a schoolboy.

It was clear that Minerva could see the man just as clearly as Severus could,

"James," she said warily, "I don't think you're welcome here. And given how very much you owe Severus, I would suggest you go out of your way to make his life less difficult." She glared at the young man. "Given the tales I've heard lately, I also suggest you keep out of my way for a while. If you keep it up, I swear I'll assign you a long-overdue detention," she finished in full professorial mode.

"Ah. Yes, ma'am," James Potter muttered. Apparently he hadn't expected that kind of greeting from his old Head of House. "But I need to tell you before the Old Man does. Sirius is innocent. Dumbledore's got his name cleared. They're in Dumbledore's office, waiting to talk about Harry."

"What!?" Severus shot to his feet.

Minerva put a hand on Severus' arm. "I was afraid it was something like this, with the build-up Albus is giving this meeting," she sighed. "He was dropping hints...that perhaps Black wasn't in league with You Know Who, after all."

"You must be ecstatic," Severus snarled, shaking off her hand. He began pacing, wondering what this turn of events meant. How Albus managed to get one of his favored students off of a sentence in Azkaban.

"I must admit..." She paused as if having a hard time putting her thoughts together. "I would be far more animated about this if I wasn't so bloody tired."

She sighed and closed her eyes, appearing to doze. After a moment she opened them with an effort and seemed to shake herself. "Sorry, dear. Where was I?" She sounded for all the world like Trelawny, before getting her bearings and going on in a much more focused tone. "Severus, Sirius will want Harry. That is, if they really have cleared his name. He's Harry's godfather."

His heart contracted painfully. Of course, that's what would happen. Obviously, the bloody man would demand his rights. Just as obviously, Albus would support him.

Severus nearly retorted that Black could bloody well have Harry and good riddance. He had no illusion as to how the rest of the Wizarding world would react to Sirius Black with his name cleared. Chances were, the Wizengamot would agree with Albus and move heaven and earth to grant Black's
petition. He'd have to confess everything and it would be all over the papers. Fighting Black for the child would only bring Severus more misery.

But the memory of the boy's eyes when he asked Severus to keep him haunted him. No matter how Harry's feelings would inevitably change, Severus couldn't find it in himself to abandon the child a second time.

Eventually Harry would tire of being the ward of the resident dungeon bat, but Molly and Arthur were willing and a much more appropriate placement. Until then, he had given his sworn word to the boy. If the Ministry wanted the boy, they could go over his dead body.

Minerva's voice was very quiet, as if fearing being overheard. "If it does turn out that Black is innocent, I wonder what Azkaban will have left of Sirius' mind?" she whispered. "He was always reckless. And they say that Azkaban left him quite mad. I fear what it would do to Harry, left alone with him."

It would be well to get the assistant headmistress' support for the plan he'd worked out with the Weasleys. "Minerva..." he began, slowly, "Molly and I were speaking. She feels that we can explain our blood tie through our Muggle heritage. She says that Harry is hungry for security and that being open about my place in his life would be beneficial." Molly had come up with the second cousin story that morning. "What do you think?"

"It would prevent Albus from meddling." Minerva nodded crisply. "No one will look further than the surface."

"Mm." The man nodded, thinking.

"I think you are the best person to be Harry's guardian, in any case." Minerva said decisively.

Severus sat down again, staring at the woman. "You...you do?" He had expected her to jump to her former student's side immediately. She had isolated herself in her study for weeks after Black had been sent to Azkaban. He had only just moved into the castle himself, but it had been evident that Minerva's seclusion had been very worrying to the other staff. Severus remembered several conversations where some of the others had remarked that Black's betrayal had hit her harder than Potter's death.

She smiled at him, lopsidedly. "Yes, Severus. Before Miss Weasley's misadventure, I admit to having my reservations about your role in Harry's life, but since then..." she spread her hands in a gesture of submission, "I have seen my error. In particular, I have had some interesting intelligence from both the living and the dead." Her expression changed to one of grim determination. "Let me say again that I am very sor..."

"It's fine." Severus cut her off shortly, feeling that if he had to hear another apology, he might scream.

She smiled more sincerely. "You know, your son is very like you." She shook her head, chuckling a little. "It's so obvious when you know."
Thanks to my beta Badgerlady.

Minerva suggested they walk to the headmaster's office rather than Flooing. Severus was not at all sure it was a wise idea for her to walk all that way, but he was in no real hurry to see the headmaster.

"Professor Snape!"

"Yes?" Severus paused at hearing his name called.

The Slytherin House ghost appeared in the center of the corridor, barring their way. Disconcertingly, the Bloody Baron no longer looked like a silvery projection. His green frock coat was stained with rusty blood stains and the chains that he carried were an all-too-solid black.

His voice was still hollow as he said, "I came to pay my respects to you." He gave a courtly bow. "And to pledge you my support, should the headmaster's latest scheme not be to your liking."

"Thank you, Baron," Severus said, taking a startled step back. "Although why..?"

The Baron merely smiled. "There has not been a necromancer in these halls since Helga herself walked them..."

Minerva nodded. "I had quite a good talk with Madam Hufflepuff a few days ago." She turned to Severus. "Did you know that Hufflepuff invented this spell to save the life of Salazar Slytherin? The three founders took back Slytherin's soul. The necromancy was a great secret."

"And, of course, Salazar could not bear to live his life so beholden," said a woman's voice sadly.

Minerva and Severus turned. A plump woman was standing behind them. She wore black robes with gold trim, her blonde hair caught up in a black lace snood that was decorated with pearls.

"M-Madam Hufflepuff," stuttered the Bloody Baron. If Severus didn't know better he'd swear the specter sounded frightened.

The woman smiled gently. "Hello, Waldo," she said softly. "How are you?"

The Baron looked frightened. His already pale face gleamed with a thin sheen of sweat. "I...I'm fine." His voice sounded strained. "How nice to see you."

The witch extended her hand towards the other ghost. "You know, whenever you're ready, you could come with me, Waldo. You needn't stay here."

"I could not," the Baron hissed. "I have..." he glanced quickly at Severus and Minerva, "I have responsibilities."

Severus felt sure he would have said something else, had he and the Transfiguration professor not been standing there.

Madam Hufflepuff sighed, "You have long since discharged those 'responsibilities', Waldo. It is only your own choice that binds you now."

The Baron took a step back, shaking his head. "I...no...not...not now." He faded away quickly.
The woman sighed. "I wish he wouldn't do that." Her voice was wistful as she stared at the place where the Baron had disappeared. "I wish I could make him understand."

Minerva nodded her head sympathetically. "I am sorry Madam. It's so hard when students have difficult transitions to their next stage."

"Well, nothing to be done about that now." The woman shook herself, turned to Severus and Minerva. "I'm sorry Professor, that I have been unable to have speak with you before now. You left Hogwarts so precipitously and I am bound to my earthly haunts." She smiled in a way that told him her pun was unintentional. "As it were."

Severus could think of nothing to say. "I don't understand," was all he could gulp out.

"Rules." Madam Hufflepuff looked away. "Others may find you because they have a personal connection to you, but I have only the castle left to lead me to you."

"Oh," Severus said blankly, as if he understood.

The woman smiled. "You have rejected binding the child to you. A wise choice."

The Potions master gave her the look he normally reserved for cauldron-melting students. "It was the only choice," he said icily.

Her face turned grave. "It was not your only choice, but it was the best choice. Not many wizards would reject such a thing out of hand. You have a most unselfish heart, sir."

"As you say, Madam," Severus said in his coldest, most civil tone. "Although I doubt any share that opinion."

Minerva spoke up. "Severus, Molly has been writing me daily since she took Ginny home."

"What has she told you?" demanded Severus angrily, cursing his own weakness.

"She has told me that you have refused any and all direct repayments." The old woman looked at him over her spectacles. "The only things you seem willing to trade your soul for are your son's safety and, failing that, your mother's good name. Although a hot cup of tea seems to draw a close second."

Severus opened his mouth, shut it again. Cleared his throat. "I...I just..." He felt weirdly embarrassed by her praise, since nothing he had done was particularly praiseworthy.

Minerva patted his arm. "Don't worry, Severus. We needn't talk about it now." She turned to Madam Hufflepuff. "Can I count on your help, Madam?"

"Of course, Professor," the ghostly founder said graciously, and then faded out.

Minerva and Severus walked on in silence until they reached the stairs to the headmaster's study. Severus was too mortified to ask Minerva what she'd meant.

Minerva muttered the password when they reached the gargoyle. It sprang aside and they made their way onto the moving staircase.

When they reached the top, she gestured to Severus to precede her. He knocked.

"Enter," Dumbledore's voice called.
Lupin sat in one of Dumbledore's squishy armchairs and, next to him in a matching one, drinking tea, sat a thin bedraggled figure.

"Black," said Severus coldly. He was glad he had been warned. "So, the headmaster has caught you, has he?"

The man gave Severus an unreadable look. "Snape," he said, his voice perfectly neutral. His dirty hair was hanging into his grey eyes.

Apart from those glittering eyes, Black could have been a statue or a waxwork. His cup was held halfway to his mouth, but he seemed transfixed by Severus' presence.

Lupin made a movement as if to leap to his feet, perhaps to get between the two of them, but the headmaster made a small motion with his hand.

Slowly, without changing his expression, Black set his teacup down on the desk and leaned back in his chair. "Actually," his voice was gravelly with disuse, "you missed the Aurors. I've been cleared."

Perhaps, in this one instance, the weakness from the damned spell was an advantage. Severus waited for the tide of rage he felt against this man and his cohort to rise up in his chest, but really all he felt was a faint disappointment that the Ministry had bungled again.

Dumbledore stood up from his chair behind his desk. "Please, Severus, sit down." He waved his wand and added two more of the squishy chintz armchairs. "You as well, Minerva, since you so kindly accompanied Severus."

"Fack off, y' stupid ol' bugger," Minerva said in an accent like an Edinburgh dock worker. She put her hand to her mouth as she sat, with an expression of patently artificial remorse. "I beg your pardon...I mean, of course, Headmaster." She looked towards Severus. "You'll have to forgive me...I sometimes."

Dumbledore jumped in. "It's fine of course, Minerva," he said gently. "You see, gentlemen, she seems to have developed a sort of aphasia. She can't always control what comes out of her mouth. Madam Pomfrey assures me that it is not permanent."

Severus didn't miss the little wink Minerva sent his way.

The old wizard retook his seat, apparently satisfied that Severus was not about to lunge across the room and kill Black.

"Well, I must tell you the news...we have discovered that Sirius is innocent of the charges brought against him twelve years ago."

Dumbledore paused, as if he were expecting questions or opposition. When none came he went on, seemingly discomfited.

"So, yes. It seems that the real culprit was Peter Pettigrew, who has spent all this time as a rat. You see, he is an unregistered Animagus."

Another bombshell that didn't go off. Severus was surprised, but too tired to say much beyond, "Hmf."

It seemed that Minerva might have heard this from her ghostly informers. "So, the wee little bugger paid more attention to my class than I imagined," she said thoughtfully. "And here I only thought he passed my class because you let him copy, Remus."
Lupin half shrugged. "We...ah...he did have help," he said, looking shamefaced.

"So, we need to talk about Harry," said Black bluntly.

Now the anger did come, but it was a cold, calculating thing, edged with fear.

"What do we need to talk about?" asked Severus tightly.

"Well, a few things actually." Lupin put in smoothly, cutting Black off. "You see, Sirius is aware that you have been looking after Harry. And of course he's very grateful, but he..."

"He is capable of speech himself, is he not?" Minerva interrupted gently. She smiled fondly at Black.

Severus ground his teeth.

"Now, why don't you tell us what it is you wanted to talk about, my dear?" She suddenly seemed to have morphed into Molly at her most maternal.

Lupin, Black and Dumbledore looked at her as if she'd grown a second head.

Black cleared his throat. "Well, I'm the boy's godfather. And the closest known blood relative."

Minerva nodded sagely. "And?" Her voice was almost cloying.

It seemed that Gryffindors did not care for their Head of House when she was in this mood. Lupin looked as if he would prefer to be anywhere else in the world.

Black, to Severus' surprise, grew more agitated. The scraggly man appeared to be sweating now. He stood, paced up and down the office once, as if collecting his thoughts. "I escaped from Azkaban when I found out that Peter was alive and stalking Harry. I wanted to protect Harry. And after that other boy..."

He wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers as he began pacing the room again. "Well, after I saw in the iProphet/i that the Longbottom boy had been killed, I started watching Harry, you know. Just keeping an eye on him. I didn't mean for it to happen. For him to actually start talking to me. And then, after he started, I didn't want him to stop, now that he was opening up to someone. I certainly didn't expect him to start looking for me every single day of the week. He's so affection-starved. It seemed harmless enough at the time. I never meant to deceive him but I suppose I needed some human contact, too. I guess I let it go too far."

"Do you mean to tell me you've been meeting with the boy secretly? He's been...talking? To you?" demanded Severus, rising from his chair at the rambling, decidedly creepy, confession. If Black had laid a hand on Harry, he was not going to be responsible for his actions.

Lupin apparently realized what Severus was about. He jumped up between the two of them. "No, Severus, he didn't mean it like that!" Putting both hands on Severus' shoulders and holding them with unnatural strength, he said, "Just show him, for god's sake, Sirius.

With that, Black nodded, and in a twinkling morphed into Harry's huge black familiar.

For a bare second, words failed Severus. Then, "You BASTARD!" Severus tried to push the shorter wizard out of the way, but Lupin fought to keep him away from Black. "Do you have ANY idea what you've done?"

Incensed at how neatly he had been tricked, Severus struggled to get his wrists out of Lupin's firm
grip. He realized that Lupin had asked him three times if he might bring "Snuffles" to Spinner's End. When Severus had finally gotten tired of Lupin's harassment, he had cordially and sarcastically used the ritual words of invitation. As long as Black remained a dog, Severus' wards had recognized him as an invited guest.

If he could have reached his wand in that moment, he would have used an Unforgivable on the both of them.

"Severus...calm down...," Dumbledore said loudly. "I'm sure that once we explain..."

Severus turned sharply, rounding on the headmaster. Lupin let him go, apparently not nearly as interested in protecting Dumbledore. "Not two weeks ago, I found the boy after a very serious attempt at killing himself. No doubt it was at least partly because this-this-this..." Words failed Severus for the moment. He couldn't think of a bad enough word to call Black. "...iCreature/i was missing and presumed idead/i. Now he will have to discover that the only living being he's chosen to put that much trust in has been ideceiving/i him the entire time."

Dumbledore stepped back. "What do you mean, Severus?"

"I mean that the 'accident' I told you about was no such thing," The Potions master growled. He stepped forward to stand nose to nose with the man. "You have no idea what the child has been through."

"I do, though," Black said softly from behind him.

Severus wheeled. "And, pray tell, what do you think you know?" he sneered. "Do you know how you're going to explain this latest to him? Do you know how he's likely to take yet another revelation of adults keeping secrets?"

Black crossed his arms over his chest. "I know that you're his father." He looked grim. "I know that Lily..."

"She told you?" gasped Lupin.

Black broke off staring at Severus. "No. But it's obvious, isn't it? I'm shocked you didn't put it together." He gave a little bark of a laugh. "James was my cousin, remember?"

At their blank expressions, the man sighed, ran his fingers through his hair. "James' parents came from pure-blood lines. Both only children. I was going to speak to James about it, but just after his father was killed, Lily announced she was pregnant. One night, before we found out about Voldemort targeting them, Lily was working, so we went to my place. James had a little too much to drink and told me that he was pretty certain the child wasn't actually his. He said he'd found a Muggle pamphlet about infertility in Lily's things. So he asked me to do the testing spell."

"How would you know that sort of spell?" asked Lupin in surprise.

Black smiled bitterly. "I never told you why my parents chucked me out, did I?"

"You just said that you argued with your parents," replied Lupin, clearly not seeing how that was relevant. "I don't understand."

"My mother wanted me to marry Niobe Selwyn, remember?" said Black. "But the Selwyns wouldn't have it unless they were sure I didn't carry the Blight. My mother did the spell and, as it happened, I do." He shrugged. "A lot of the pure-blood families have it that the Blight comes from..." he cleared his throat, glancing at Minerva uneasily, "youthful indiscretions."
Severus snorted. "You mean she thought you caught it from..." He also paused to glance at the Transfiguration professor, opting for a more euphemistic way of putting it, "...sleeping with Muggle girls."

"Chance would've been a fine thing," Black grumbled bitterly. "But yes, she decided I must have 'spent my seed,' as she put it. Of course, my dear brother had no such defect. But he disappeared before his wedding." He turned away, then, to pour himself more tea from the pot on Dumbledore's desk. "Anyway, it's not a difficult spell. So, I tested James."

"So, you knew then?" breathed Lupin. "How did James take it?"

"How do you think he took it?" asked Black impatiently. "We spent the rest of the evening getting blind, stinking drunk." He sighed, his shoulders sagging. "I had to spend the next day talking sense into him. Lucky for him, Lily had a patient with some problems and she didn't get back until the next evening."

"Lucky for him?" asked Severus, confused that Black hadn't shared Potter's outrage.

Black nodded. "It was the only chance of continuing the Potter line, after all. Lily knew that. First we couldn't work out who she'd asked. Then we were worried she had gone and slept with a Muggle. Neither of us could figure it out until Lily told us about Harry had showing his first magic to you."

"The magic always knows," said Minerva quietly.

"That's just an old wives' tale," muttered Severus uncomfortably.

"Well, it made sense actually." Black was being far too reasonable about this, in Severus' opinion. "We all knew how close you two were in school. And then she happened to drop that you're not particularly interested in women." Black looked almost remorseful for a second. "She said she used to let people think you and she were an item because it made it easier for you at home. I'll be honest, that put James a lot more at ease with the whole thing."

Severus had no interest in a dead man's mental health.

"When James and Lily were killed..." Black's voice got very thick. He cleared his throat. "I thought for sure you'd come forward. And Peter...Well, I didn't want him getting away with it. But he faked his death and I got sent to Azkaban."

Lily had told him that it was Pettigrew not Black that had betrayed them. "But you confessed!"

"It was my fault," Sirius said quietly. "I told them to use Peter as their Secret Keeper. He went straight to Voldemort with the information. As for going to prison-I didn't get a trial, remember? And really...for a while I felt like Azkaban was all I deserved, anyway."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "So you see, Sirius was convicted on the strength of one illegal confession. The Ministry owes Sirius an apology."

"Oh, cummoan y'fackin' ol' wanka," Minerva shouted suddenly, standing and pointing her finger at Dumbledore. "Y' fackin cannae say i's'onny them. Y' only went th'once an y's laat 'nae t'b doon'." She waved her hands dismissively, then her voice dropped and she asserted, "Ya fackin ol' bastert." She sat back down in her chair. "Pure givin' me the boak," she finished, disgusted.

And then she looked at Sirius. "I'm sorry, Sirius," she went on much more intelligibly. "I knew there was something odd going on, but at the time..." She trailed off. "Well...regardless..." Her voice
trailed off and she sniffed.

Severus was getting another headache; this whole meeting was going rather differently than what he’d envisioned.

"Getting back to the point," he said after a long minute in which everyone seemed very intent on not meeting anyone else's eyes. "What did you want to say about Harry?"

Sirius cleared his throat. Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair while Lupin and Minerva both seemed to hold their breaths.

The scruffy man leaned against Dumbledore's desk and stared into his teacup as he spoke. "I just wanted to say that I don't want to get between you and Harry. And I certainly don't want to get this dragged through the press. The boy has been through too much already. I just wondered..." The man grimaced as if he was tasting something very bitter indeed. "I wondered if you might...allow...me to be some part of Harry's life." Finally he lifted his eyes to meet Severus'. "Please?"

For one mad second, all the humiliation he'd ever taken at this man's hands welled up in his mind. All the petty pranks and the one that nearly killed him. The night Potter had rescued him from the werewolf's clutches while Black had jeered and laughed. All of it burned like a newly opened wound in his chest.

This one moment could pay it all back.

Severus straightened up in his chair and looked straight into the other man's tortured eyes. He could hurt Black in a way that allowed for no retaliation.

It took only a moment to come to a decision.

"Yes, Black," he said softly. "If you truly want to help the child, and you're amenable to certain conditions, I'm sure we can make some arrangement."
At quarter after six, Harry was packed and waiting in the sitting room, near the fire. He tried not to be nervous as the seconds ticked by, but he couldn't help but anxiously look at the clock.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill were in the kitchen talking quietly. The twins had just come in and gone directly upstairs to change their clothes. Hermione had gone home at five and Ron was sitting with Harry reading his comics.

At twenty minutes past six, there was a small flurry among the adults as a post owl flew through the kitchen window.

"Another special edition." Bill said, sounding irritable, "So what is it this time? Rita Skeeter dragging another poor sod's miserable home life all over the front page? I swear the Prophet is getting lower every day."

"I notice you still read it." Observed one of the twins as they came noisily downstairs.

There was the sound of the paper opening. "Merlin's beard!" Mr Weasley gasped, "You won't believe this!"

For one awful second, Harry worried that it might be an article about him like the one that was in the Muggle newspaper. He turned to look through the doorway at the three in the kitchen.

Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, holding the paper so that Harry couldn't see the headline. Bill and Mrs. Weasley were sitting with him. "Sirius Black was cleared of all charges!"

"You're joking!" exclaimed Mrs. Weasley. She stood to read the paper over Mr. Weasley's shoulder.

Harry might have gone in to see what all the excitement was about, if the Floo hadn't flamed green at the moment.

Professor Snape stepped out of the fire, looking tense. His eyes swept the room, taking in the little commotion in the kitchen. So involved with the news about Sirius Black were the Weasleys that they didn't actually notice the professor coming in.

He sighed and made a little hmph noise in his throat. "Well, I had hoped to get here before that did."
Something about Snape's face didn't look right. He didn't look angry or sneering, he looked curiously sad as he gazed at the Weasleys.

As if feeling his eyes on her, Mrs. Weasley whipped her head around. "Severus!" She smiled and bustled over. "Right on time, dear. Do you want a cup of tea before you leave?"

Snape smiled slightly, wiping away the melancholy of a moment ago. "No thank you, Molly." The expression was startling on his harsh face. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Mrs. Weasley made a little scoffing sound in her throat, "It was nothing, Severus. Nothing at all." Her voice was warm and pleased. She hesitated, then she leaned forward and hugged the professor as though he were one of her sons. Snape reached up to awkwardly pat her shoulder looking a lot like Harry always felt when she did this; pleased, but befuddled as to why anyone would be hugging him.

Snape cleared his throat when Mrs. Weasley released him, hurriedly indicating that Harry should precede him.

Mrs. Weasley gathered Harry into a tight hug. "You take care of yourself, all right?" Her voice dropped, "And see if you can't get Professor Snape to look after himself too."

Harry smiled, "I'll do my best." When she let go, he picked up his gear and took a pinch of Floo powder, "Er...where are we going?" He asked not wanting to call for the wrong fireplace.

"My office." Snape supplied, "Lupin is there already." Was it Harry's imagination or did Snape suddenly look nervous?

He took a pinch of the Floo powder and tossed it into the fireplace. A second later he was tumbling onto the carpet of Snape's office.

"Harry!" Lupin exclaimed, smiling as he came forward to help Harry with his bag and hurry him out of the way as Snape emerged from the fire.

Snape stumbled as he left the fire. He would have fallen had not another man reached out from the shadows beside the fire to steady him.

"Unhand me," snarled the Potion's Master.

The man let go and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, "Sorry...I was just...trying to help." His voice was gravelly.

"Well, don't." Snape hissed in a tone he hadn't used since they'd left Hogwarts. "We're going to explain the situation to Harry and then the both of you can get out." He brushed off his robe, his face taking on that odd nervous tension again. Crossing the room, he sat down at the desk and indicated to Harry that he should also sit.

"Did you eat?" He asked Harry.

"Yes, sir." Harry said, uncomfortable under the stares of Lupin and this other man. "Mrs. Weasley made me have something."

Lupin pulled up another chair as did the stranger. A tea tray sat on the desk and without asking him, Lupin poured a cup of tea and set it in front of Harry.

"What's going on?" asked Harry suddenly twigging that something was very wrong even though the
tea didn't smell of old socks.

Snape made an irritable noise in his throat. "Harry, I would like to introduce you to Sirius Black."

"Umm...isn't he the one who..?"

"The Ministry has been hunting all this time?" The shaggy haired man asked in his gravelly voice. "Yes. That's me." He smiled wryly. "But, as of six hours ago I was cleared of all charges."

"And more importantly, he has been protecting you all term. Unknown to all of us." Lupin smiled at the man fondly, "You see, he had information that one of Voldemort's minions had gotten close to you. Not a safe situation."

"Gotten close to me?" asked Harry, unsettled.

"Not to worry," Snape said, catching his eyes "That man has been taken away by the Aurors."

"Oh." Harry said, pretending to understand. He waited while the three men exchanged glances.

"You see," Lupin went on, "Your friend Ron's rat was actually a wizard in disguise. An unregistered Animagus."

"What?" He looked around at the three adults. If it had been anyone but Snape saying this, he might have suspected them of teasing him. "But...how? That rat's been in Ron's family for..."

"Twelve years." The scruffy man growled, "Rather a long time for a rat to live, don't you think? He was biding his time. Waiting for the right moment to act." He looked directly at Harry. His grey eyes were almost feverishly bright. "As soon as I found out I had to come. I knew I needed to protect you. I knew he was here. I escaped from Azkaban and came here. In disguise. I've been watching over you all term."

"What do you mean? What disguise?" Harry asked slowly.

In answer, the man stood up, then he seemed to melt, taking the shape of a giant black dog.

"No bloody way." Harry stood up so fast the chair tipped, his stomach clenched up into a tight hot knot and his heart pounding in his head.

He backed up, intending to flee the room. He wasn't sure where, but he needed out of this room right now.

Naturally the door was locked.

"Let me out." Harry said quietly, holding the doorknob with one shaking hand.

"Harry." Said the man who used to be Snuffles, "Listen, I'm.."

Harry whirled, "Don't you dare say you're sorry! I'm tired of people saying they're sorry! Nobody's sorry and nobody gives a toss about me. They never have! They only care about something they think I did when I was a baby!" he gasped for breath.

Snape cleared his throat."Harry." he said softly. "Stop."

It was the Storyteller voice. For some reason, it stopped Harry cold before he could really get into his rant.
Snape walked forward a pace, holding Harry's eyes with his own. He reached out, as though to put his hand on his shoulder, but seemed to think better of it.

"I can't change the past, but..." The stern man hesitated, looking supremely uncomfortable "But I assure you that many people do care for you. We've..." he paused to swallow and dart his eyes at the other men, "I've made terrible mistakes. I should have taken up my responsibilities much sooner. You are quite right."

Harry swallowed hard, then sniffed, willing the lump in his throat away.

Sirius Black sat back in his chair, "I should tell you...I don't know if anyone's told you, but I'm your godfather." He glanced at Snape, "I don't want to cause you trouble, but I'd like the chance to get to know you."

"You already know me pretty well." Harry crossed his arms across his chest, resentfully, "I told you enough. When you were lying to me and pretending to be my familiar." He burned with shame at some of the things he'd admitted to the dog. Private things. How the Dursley's treated him. How he felt about Neville.

The man brushed his hair out of his eyes. "Well, yes. But I was a dog at the time and what I mostly heard were the feelings. Its hard to remember the words from when I was a dog."

"I..." That would make it slightly less humiliating, but Harry wasn't at all sure he was ready to believe that.

"So, what Black would like, " Snape jumped in, "Is to be allowed to spend time with you. It is completely up to you."

"Up to me?" asked Harry puzzled.

Black nodded, "Harry, for all I don't remember the specifics of the situation, I know its been difficult for you. You don't need to decide now. Think about it."

"Sirius has told the press that he doesn't want custody of you because he hasn't dealt with the stress of Azkaban." Lupin put, "He has told them that he is going to insist on your custody going to your closest Wizarding relative because he doesn't think you should be with Muggles."

"Why do you get to decide?" Harry asked confused.

"Because your father's will specified that you were to come to me, if something happened to them. I'm your godfather. Everyone knows it. This way, it won't look odd to anyone." Black said simply. "Since your closest Wizarding relative is, apart from me, none other than Severus Snape. Your mother's..." Black gave Harry a sly grin and cleared his throat, "...cousin."

Harry was having a hard time keeping track of all these new relationships he apparently had. "But he's really my..." He paused not sure if he should go on.

Black nodded, "Yes, I know. I've always known." He said quietly, "It's actually a fairly common issue with pure blood families, though most of them won't admit it."

"Oh."

"So, we're going with this cover story." Lupin said, gently. "This way, even if people do find out about the Dursley's, you won't have half the Wizarding World trying to get custody of you."
Harry nodded, hoping the conversation was over. He just felt like he couldn't take another thing. He slumped with his back against the door. For some reason he still felt like he wanted to sit down and cry.

Snape came to his rescue. "Gentlemen," he said, "I think we can finish this conversation later. I do believe that Harry and I are in need of some peace and quiet."

The two other men looked at each other and stood as one. Black looked at Snape, then said, "Let me know if you need any help."

Snape's lip curled, but all he said was "Of course." To Harry, he said, "Until the other students return, you'll be sleeping in my quarters. I've had the house elves furnish one of the spare rooms for you."

Harry pushed away from the door he'd been leaning on to get out of the two men's way, realizing that although it was barely seven o'clock, he was ready for bed.

Snape looked done in too. He didn't even see Lupin and Black to the office door. Instead he beckoned Harry to the inner door.

Snape's personal apartment was furnished in the same lavish grey and green as the Slytherin common room, with the window showing out onto the black lake bottom. It was tidier than Spinner's end, and the floor to ceiling bookshelves were polished and dust free. An enormous fire was burning in the fireplace.

Snape didn't give Harry any time to really look around, "Come along, Harry." the professor was already halfway down a little side passage. "This is your room." He opened the first door on the right and went in, seeming to trust that Harry would follow.

Inside was a four poster with red bed curtains that looked exactly like the one he slept in in Gryffindor tower. His trunk was at the end of the bed and his broomstick leaned up against the wall. There were tapestries depicting Quidditch hung on the stone walls and velvet curtains were drawn across a large window. Harry was glad the curtains were drawn. He thought he'd find looking out at the lake bottom at night kind of creepy.

Otherwise, the room was actually very pleasant. The fire burned brightly on the hearth lent the room a cheerful air and a merry looking, red haired young girl waved at him from a small framed picture on top of the mantel piece.

It was the only photo in the room. "Who is that?" asked Harry, stepping closer to take a better look at the photograph. The moment the words left his mouth, the penny dropped. "Wait...is that...?" But he knew who it must be.

"Your mother." Snape said stiffly, "It's the only photo I have of her." The man shifted nervously, "I thought you might...like to have it." He paused and averted his eyes, "If you don't want it, I understand...I..."

Something like a small explosion went off inside of Harry's chest. "I..." his throat was too tight to speak. He peered at the photo; the girl stood in bright sunlight and she laughed soundlessly as she waved at Harry.

Without realizing it, he'd taken the picture down from the mantle and was staring at it. "Professor?" he asked thickly.

"Yes, Harry?" Snape was standing right behind him.
"I..." To Harry's horror, he felt tears slide down his cheeks. He wanted to ask the professor why he'd given him his only picture of Lily. The frame was expensive looking and the picture looked as though it had been there a long time, so it wasn't an old photo the man had just dug up. Or at least it didn't seem that way. It was one of Snape's own treasured keepsakes, of his best friend. Of the girl he'd confided in and laughed with. The girl with whom he was inseparable.

There was no reason for Snape to give him this, not a single reason, except...Harry pushed the thought away before it formed.

Immediately, another thought took its place. One that was almost as unbelievable, but less uncomfortable; there was no reason to do it except to be kind. Strange as that seemed, he did want to make Harry's life better.

"Harry?" Snape's arm slipped around his shoulder. "Are you...?"

The boy clutched the photo to his chest and turned his face away, embarrassed.

"It's all right." The tall man said.

Harry shook his head and tried to step away, but Snape wouldn't let him. "Sit down." He steered them to sit on the bed. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Giving Snape a jerky shrug, Harry tried to get a grip on himself. Fortunately, the man didn't seem to expect an answer.

They sat there silently for a long time. When Harry felt like he could say something without bawling like a child, he said, "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome." Snape's voice was soft, "All right, now?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, I should let you get ready for bed, then." He stood and then said hesitantly, "My room is right next door." He went over to one of the tapestries and pushed it aside to reveal another bedroom. "If you need me, you can ring this bell." He let the tapestry fall and flicked an embroidered bell. It gave a clear, two-toned "ding-dong" that sounded like a doorbell, "I'm not..." he cleared his throat, "I don't think its a good idea to put a door here, right now. Eventually we'll want one. The bathroom is the same." he indicated the other tapestry, "For the moment, I don't feel good about you being able to lock me out." Turning back, he said, "I realize this might seem like punishment. I'm sorry, but I couldn't..." He caught Harry's eyes. "I wish I'd thought to be more careful sooner. I regret that I wasn't."

They stared at each other for a few heartbeats more, before Snape seemed to shake himself. "Well, good night, Harry." He said, walking through the opening in the wall and letting the tapestry fall closed behind him.

Harry shook his head. This evening was just one more weird stressful evening in a year of weird stressful evenings.

He unpacked the little rucksack that had his pajamas and books in it. He was was surprised at the size of his bathroom, but he didn't do more than brush his teeth. Tommorow he would investigate his new room. He was asleep almost the minute his head hit the pillow.

It was some hours later when he woke up out of one of those horrible dreams he'd been having lately, his bed soaked in cold sweat. For a few minutes, he lay in the dark, trying to sort real from
dream. Longingly he wished that Hedwig was here, but she was all the way up in the owlery. His mind turned to Snuffles then and that great black wave of grief threatened to cover him again. It didn't matter that Snuffles wasn't actually dead--he was just as beyond reach now.

He thought about the night he'd tried to hang himself. He wondered if there was any way to off himself that didn't hurt.

He thought about the promise he'd given Snape. He'd sworn he wouldn't hurt himself. If he were dead, did promises matter? They mattered now, though.

He heard sound from the other room.

"Yes, I know." Snape said, as if in answer to someone, "But, I'm sure the boy doesn't need to hear such sentiments from me, of all people."

It sounded like Snape was talking to someone, but Harry didn't hear a second voice. He crawled out of bed and one of the torches kindled itself, apparently spelled to do so when someone was moving about.

Being careful not to touch it, in case it made a noise, Harry got right up next to the tapestry that led to Snape's room.

A pause, and then, "Lily, I appreciate..." Snape stopped speaking, as if he'd been interrupted. Snape was talking in his sleep apparently. He spoke very clearly, for all that.

"No, I have no desire to speak to my father, thank you very much..." a long pause, then, "No. Absolutely not. You can just put that fucking idea right out of your bloody mind."

He couldn't help it, hearing that out of the mouth of his stern guardian, Harry snorted softly with laughter.

Snape was a light sleeper. "Harry?" he called, "Is that you?"

Seeing nothing for it, Harry called back, "Er, yes sir." He backed up, towards the bed.

Snape pushed aside the tapestry and came through, looking far too awake for someone who'd just been muttering in their sleep. "Are you all right?" he asked sharply.

Nodding, Harry hurriedly got back into bed. "Bad dream." he admitted, not wanting to talk about the thoughts he'd just been having.

The wizard came over to his bed side and pulled the chair from the desk to sit in. "I had one too." he said, gravely.

Harry nodded again. "I heard you talking in your sleep. To my mum, I think." Then, greatly daring, he asked, "What was it about?"

For a minute, Harry thought Snape wasn't going to answer, then, quietly he said, "I did dream of your mother. She was saying I should make peace with my father. A lost cause, even in dreams, I'm afraid." He sighed, "Frankly, I have always been glad the old bastard's dead."

"How can you be glad of something like that?" asked Harry, appalled that Snape would speak of his father so.

Smiling thinly, Snape said, "Because my father treated me much the same as your uncle treated you."

Of course, with my mother to protect me, he never dared to lock me in the cellar for more than punishment. If he had had his way, he would've locked me in the cellar day and night. I was always a great disappointment to him." The man gave Harry a long measuring look, then, "When he was dying, I looked after him. I was always relieved that it was not a long illness."

"Why did you look after him, if you hated him?" asked Harry honestly.

It seemed as if that question had never occurred to the man before. His eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened into an expression that Hermione wore when she was trying to puzzle out a complex arithmancy formula.

"Duty, I suppose." He said at length. "I looked after him because it was my duty as his son."

"Did you love him?" Harry asked. His face grew hot as he realized how embarrassingly sentimental he sounded.

It didn't seem to bother the professor though.

"I suppose I did. I suppose..." He trailed off, then restarted, "I suppose it was less for him than for me. I didn't want to see myself as the kind of person who abandons my responsibilities." He sounded very thoughtful. Then his mouth pinched up, like he had swallowed something bitter. "Although that is apparently precisely what I am." In the dim torchlight, the man's black eyes gleamed mournfully.

"It's okay." Harry muttered, not sure what to say.

"When I first saw you at school," Snape said softly, "You seemed so sure of yourself for such a young boy. I assumed that Tuney had spoiled you the same way she spoiled her own son. I just assumed that you..."

"Sir, don't worry about it." Harry interrupted, desperate to make Snape just stop talking. There was something horrible about all this honesty. Somehow, it made his whole experience at the Dursley's ten times worse

Something softened in the professor's face. "I'm sorry. I'm mauldering. You had a bad dream, too."

"Don't want to talk about it." Harry muttered, bringing his knees up to his chest.

"That's fine." After a moment, Snape started to stand.

The same sense of desperation he'd felt a moment ago when Snape was talking made Harry's stomach clench, "Don't leave yet. Please?" He was lonely, and the way his thoughts had been going a few minutes ago was actually kind of scary.

"All right." Snape said, seeming at a loss. He sat down again, though. For about a minute they both looked at each other. Harry felt like he wanted to say something, but if he did he knew he'd come off like a pathetic little infant.

"Would you like me to read to you, Harry?" Snape finally asked, tentatively. He picked up one of the Sherlock Holmes books Harry had stacked on his night table before he fell asleep.

"Sir?" Harry wasn't quite sure he'd heard right.

The professor dropped the book, "Never mind." He said irritably, clearly he regretted speaking, "I know you're too old for that sort of thing."
"Erm...actually, sir?" Harry didn't think Snape would laugh at him, considering that he'd given Harry the book, but really he was far too old for it. He knew that, but he also knew that he wanted--no, he needed the Storyteller that Snape had become that night.

Slowly, he drew the picture book from where he hid it under his pillow. "Would you read this to me?" He asked in a rush, not looking at Snape, in case his expression turned to mocking derision.

"Of course I will." Snape said softly, taking the book.

Harry looked up and smiled happily, before snuggling down into his pillows. Snape smiled too and pulled the covers over Harry's shoulders.

It was like a scene out of the fantasies that he had had in those miserable nights in the cupboard. Snape sat in the chair reading for a long time, until Harry's eyes slide shut and the Storyteller's words merged with his dreams.

"Good night." The Storyteller whispered as he stood, at last. "Sleep well, son."

"Love you, Dad." Harry whispered back, surfacing from sleep for a moment. In his dreaming mind, he thought he'd always known that the Storyteller was his father.

There was a pause before the Storyteller replied. "I love you too, Harry."

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