**Moment of Impact**

by suitesamba

**Summary**

An accident the summer before 6th year puts Dumbledore’s plans for Harry in motion sooner than planned. Will an unexpected truce with Snape better prepare Harry for what is to come? A Snape mentors Harry fic with all the regular players, a cottage by the sea, and the righting of past wrongs. This story, while AU after OOTP, follows canon as closely as possible. It is the first story of a completed five-story arc beginning the summer after Harry’s fifth year and ending at the end of the “eighth” year.

**Notes**

This story was originally published as a WIP on fanfiction.net under my earlier pen name of “Suite Sambo” in 2010 and is being archived here for easier reading and downloading. I have reread the story and made corrections for typos, inconsistencies (where I could find them) and Americanisms. It is published here in two long sections, the first consisting of chapters 1 - 22 and the second consisting of chapters 23-44.

The next four stories in the series will be published on AO3 in the next few weeks in their entireties.
Chapter 1

FIRST MOMENT OF IMPACT

The summer after his fifth year at Hogwarts was nearly half over and Harry Potter had spent most of it in his bedroom in the house on Privet Drive, reading. As expected, after Moody's threats at King's Cross Station, the Dursleys gave Harry a wide berth. He didn't leave the house often, just to weed the garden—the only outside chore that Aunt Petunia insisted he do—and to pop in on Mrs. Figg every now and then. With nothing else to do besides the usual cooking and cleaning indoors he sent Hedwig to his friends with a request for some interesting reading material. He needed something to keep his mind off of the Department of Mysteries, off of the prophecy, off of Sirius. Now that he knew why he was stuck here at the Dursley's every summer, the boredom was easier to bear and he didn't take his isolation so... personally.

Hermione had jumped at the chance to help out. Hedwig returned almost immediately with a heavy book: *Hogwarts, a History*. Harry almost laughed out loud when he unwrapped it. Hermione had been trying to get Ron and Harry to read that particular book for five years. He'd gone through it in less than a week, finding it fascinating in a dull sort of way. Much of it he already knew, but there were quite a few surprises. He wondered if Hermione had read the part about the house elf revolt of 1344, or if the Weasley twins had ever found the secret staircase to the observatory on top of the North Tower.

He was only half through the first book when Hedwig delivered a book from Ron. He smiled broadly when he unwrapped *Perfect Prefects: Hogwarts' Shining Stars*. The accompanying note read "Found this in Percy's old room. Knew you'd enjoy it. Notice there's no mention of Ron Weasley in the book?" Errol, the Weasley family's ancient owl, showed up a few hours after Hedwig with an offering from Ginny. It was a small book, leather bound and quite old. "Grandma Prewett's diary," wrote Ginny, "from when she was at Hogwarts. Not magical at all. Don't tell mum!" Harry kept that book next to his bed and read random passages when his other reading was too dry or dull. He quickly decided that Ginny and Ron's Grandma was more like Fred and George than Molly. *Percival Prewett never knew what hit him! We were standing in the Great Hall, having just eaten lunch, when his stomach started rumbling and he started to pass gas, rather loudly at that. He turned red to the roots of his hair and ran out of the room, clutching his stomach. Maude Harris was giggling so hard she practically snorted....*

His friends, Harry mentally noted, were careful not to send him anything too deep or dark or depressing. No books on Occlumency. No books on the history of the Dark Arts. Nothing at all on Voldemort.

Voldemort.

The prophecy. His friends knew nothing about the prophecy. He knew he had to tell them. He owed it to them, but finding the words, finding the courage... Perhaps when they were all together again he would be able to voice it. To tell them that they were friends with a dead man, or a killer. But not in a letter. Not by owl....
He shook his head and gazed out the window of his room which looked out over Privet Drive. Neat rows of houses, immaculate lawns, not a leaf out of place. It was getting close to dinner time now, and Uncle Vernon would be home soon. He’d finished *Hogwarts, a History* and had returned it to Hermione. Hedwig glared at him when he’d given her the heavy package. Hermione had sent back *Magical Me*, Gilderoy Lockhart's autobiography, and Harry was well into it now, just beginning a chapter on Lockhart's encounter with a creature called "Big Foot" in the States. He sighed and closed his book. He hadn’t weeded and watered the curbside flower beds, and even though it was Aunt Petunia’s garden, Uncle Vernon would be sure to notice. Best to get at it. Uncle Vernon liked to see him working. He could get started now and his uncle would be sure to see him sweating and miserable when he got home from work. Might cheer him up for an entire evening.

Thirty minutes later, Harry was up to his elbows in zinnias and lemon balm. Curiously, he didn't so much mind this particular job. It rather reminded him of Herbology class with Professor Sprout. He was reaching down into a particularly thick patch of mint when several things happened at once.

A loud and raucous "Meow!" startled him as a sleek gray cat, which had apparently been hiding in the mint patch, jumped in the air. A loud "Crack!" reverberated from somewhere behind him and Harry's scar exploded with pain. He stumbled backward toward the street, gripping his forehead, tripped on the curb and sprawled on the pavement. It was as all this was happening that Uncle Vernon's company car rounded the corner, ran into and over Harry, and screeched to a halt after running head on into a tree.

He heard yelling, and footsteps running toward him.

"Harry! Harry . . . oh hell . . ."

"Bill?" Harry muttered. His left hand was still on his head but the pain there was now rivaled by the pain in his legs, and a sick, wet feeling in his right arm.

"Lie still, Harry," murmured Bill Weasley. "Don't try to move. Help is coming."

"Legs hurt," said Harry with a barely suppressed groan. His scar was throbbing and he felt or heard? a dark wind and a cold voice. "Potter? Did that hurt?" And then the voice was gone, and the pain ebbed.

*Crack!*

"Bill! What happened?" said a second voice. Someone else knelt down next to him.

"Wrap this around him," said an unfamiliar female voice.

Harry groaned as he felt someone press something around his legs. *What had happened?*

"Don't move him. Wait for Dumbledore."

"Remus?" said Harry, struggling to sit up. Somehow, Harry felt better knowing his old professor, his father's friend, was here.

A woman's screams startled him again, and he jerked his head at the sound.

"Quiet, Harry, it's just your aunt. Bill, someone has to deal with these Muggles." There was more jostling and a few blurry yet vaguely familiar faces pushed their way in, faces Harry thought belonged to the Dursley's neighbors on Privet Drive.

Tires squealed and a car door slammed as a passerby on the road stopped to see what the commotion
was all about. The noise almost covered up a double *crack* as two more wizards Apparated in.

Albus Dumbledore, his robes covered by a long green cape, bent down next to Harry. Bill began moving all the neighbors away, assuring them that the situation was under control and that Harry would be taken directly to hospital. Someone was being rather pushy, not wanting to leave the scene until an ambulance was called. Bill deftly maneuvered himself between the woman and Harry, blocking her view of the Headmaster as he tried to push Harry's hand away from his head. Harry clamped it down tighter.

"Harry! Is he…?"

Harry shook his head. "Was, gone now."

"Harry, we're going to get you help. Stay calm."

"How are we going to move him?" asked a low voice. Harry turned his head slightly but couldn't make the face come into focus.

"All the easy means are impossible," answered Dumbledore. "Apparition or Flooing could injure him further, and an illegal Portkey used from this location….."

"It's the best option," answered the other wizard. "Unless you want him on the Knight Bus." Harry grimaced at that suggestion. "One of us will have to go with him—hold him to prevent injury when we arrive."

"You know the risks, Severus," answered Dumbledore.

Snape! Harry's eyes opened.

"Where?" he muttered. "Where are you taking me?"

"St Mungo's," answered Remus' voice from above them.

"No," corrected Dumbledore quickly. "He can't go there."

"Albus, he needs help! Look at him! We can't…."

"It will be in the *Prophet* if he goes there," said Dumbledore softly.

"Hogwarts, then," said Snape's cool voice. "And quickly. He is losing blood."

"How?" asked Remus, clearly frustrated. "We can't just disappear in the middle of all these Muggles.…."

"We'll move him away from the crowd—in that Muggle's car," said Snape.

"But Portkeying while holding someone…."

"I've done it before."

"There really is no other way," added Dumbledore. "The pressure of Apparition with these wounds. The pressure would…." His voice trailed away into a moment of silence. "Harry?" he said, "Can you hear me?"

Harry nodded.
"Professor Snape is going to Portkey to Hogsmeade with you. You must listen to him carefully and do what he says."

"Can't you…?" Even in his current condition, his instincts told him not to trust Snape. Snape had wanted Sirius to die...

"Harry . . . " Dumbledore's face was close to his now, and his voice was soft. "You need help now. Professor Snape is the one who has the best chance of getting you that help. Accept this. Listen to him closely."

Dumbledore stood and Snape knelt down in his place. There was more commotion from the yard where the neighbors stood and the car that had arrived at the same time as Snape and Dumbledore started up and drove off.

"Potter, your head must be in contact with my body when the Portkey activates. You have to will yourself to me—don't think. I know this will be hard for you but you must do it. Maintain contact with your head and make it your most fervent desire to stick with me wherever I go. Understood?" He ended with what would have passed for a sneer if the situation had been less serious.

"Remus, you can drive a Muggle car, can you not?" asked Dumbledore quietly.

"It's been a while but yes, I can," answered Remus. He hurried away and commandeered Uncle Vernon's car which fortunately was still running and drivable, even with the sizeable dent in the bumper and bonnet.

Snape passed his wand quickly over the injured Boy Who Lived. Harry felt his legs tighten as Snape lifted him carefully and crawled into the back seat of the waiting car.

"Watch the blood!" roared Uncle Vernon from the yard where he was being comforted by Aunt Petunia

Dumbledore simply ignored him as he slid into the front passenger seat, leaving Bill alone to deal with the Muggles and Apparate out later. Remus sped off with a squeal of tires, driving a dozen blocks and around several corners before deftly pulling the car over to the side of the road.

"I'll go ahead and get Hagrid and a carriage," said Dumbledore. "Take him to the gates, Severus. The wards, you know…." He was gone with a whisper of a crack and Harry once again heard Snape's cold voice.

"Head," said Snape.

Harry looked for Remus instead.

"Remus, please . . . " he croaked. He raised his good hand toward the werewolf.

"Head, Harry," said Remus quietly. "Lean in tight. I'll be there as soon as I help Bill with these Muggles."

"You may have to Obliviate them," said Snape. Harry, from his inglorious position with his head and shoulders on the Potion Master's lap, thought he sounded happy at the prospect.

"Take Uncle Vernon's car back," said Harry, gritting his teeth as pain once again radiated out from his legs up to his torso. Snape and Remus exchanged glances.

"I'll take it back, Harry, not to worry," assured Remus. "Hold tight, now. Severus is going to Portkey
back with you. He needs to concentrate to hold on to you and you must listen to him. Do what he
tells you."

"You must retain contact," said Snape.

"I know," said Harry sharply. "You keep saying—"

"Because it is important," replied Snape, his cold voice even icier. "If I lose my grip on you—"

"Harry," said Remus, "You're going to Hogwarts. You're going home."

Harry nodded. He closed his eyes tightly

"Now!" said Snape, pressing what felt like a quill into his uninjured hand.

With the usual tug behind the navel, they disappeared and before he had time to even think about the
odd sense of both flying and falling at the same time, he was jarred by Snape's feet hitting the ground
heavily. His body felt extremely heavy as Snape stumbled then steadied himself. Then Snape was
hurrying, almost running, still holding him. Harry heard shouts ahead of them but didn't open his
eyes. Screwing them tight, his head still pressed against Snape's smooth black cape, seemed to help
with the pain.

The last thing he remembered was Hagrid lifting him from Snape's arms and placing him in a waiting
carriage. Someone inside took him in their arms but he didn't remember who it was. He only
remembered seeing, out of the corner of his eye as Hagrid handed him up, Snape, panting, leaning
heavily against the thestral that was harnessed to the carriage.

Chapter 2

MISSING DAYS

He was looking at his arm. The bandages were gone and a long, jagged scar remained. Curiously,
the scar was in the shape of a lightning bolt. The edges of the scar were red and when he reached up
with his good arm and touched the scar on his head, pain shot through his arm—

Harry Potter awoke with a jerk. Instinctively, he reached over to his bedside table for his glasses, but
when he tried to move his arm, he grimaced in pain.

"Oww!" he muttered.

"Careful there, now, Harry, dear." Someone gently moved his arm back to a comfortable resting
position at his side. "And here are you glasses. Hold on…"

"Thanks," mumbled Harry, gazing through his glasses with sudden clarity at Ron's mum, Mrs.
Weasley. She was sitting on an upholstered rocker pulled up close to his bed. A worn old book
rested in her lap.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" she asked as she adjusted the covers over his legs.

Harry looked down at his legs beneath the sheets. He wiggled his toes experimentally. Nothing
happened. He looked up at Mrs. Weasley.
"Can't move my toes," he said. His voice was scratchy.

"No, of course not dear. Madam Pomfrey has your legs immobilized still, hasn't she?" She reached behind him and fluffed his pillows, then helped ease him up into a seated position. His legs dragged along with him. He could feel them, feel a vague, dull ache deep in his bones. He figured that was a good sign, as signs go.

"What time is it?" he asked sleepily, glancing out the window across the room. It was the same window that Hermione had slammed just a little more than a year ago, capturing Rita Skeeter in her Animagus form.

"Nearly noon, dear," answered Mrs. Weasley. "I expect you're famished. I'll have something brought up for you to eat."

Harry did feel hungry. He wondered how long it had been since he'd had a proper meal—not a day, he guessed.

"Sure, that would be great," he answered, smiling at Ron's mum. She ducked out of the room for a minute but came right back and sat down again.

"So," he said after a moment, "Why are you here? Don't you have…er… things to do at the Burrow?"

Molly sighed and put down her book. "Well, Harry, it's like this. You see…well, things have…er… happened that we didn't quite expect." Her face was turning pink, rather like Ron's ears did when he got nervous.

Harry felt a twinge in his stomach. This didn't sound good at all.

"Things?" he asked. "Er, what kind of things, specifically?"

She was interrupted—and Harry knew from experience that that was never a good sign—by the arrival of a house elf carrying a large covered tray. The elf, one that Harry didn't recognize, handed the tray to Mrs. Weasley and popped away.

"You were saying?" prompted Harry as Mrs. Weasley placed the tray on the next bed and uncovered it.

"Oh yes, of course," she said. "Well, it all has to do with a Muggle newspaper. The Surrey Advertiser, I believe Hermione said…"

"That's one of the papers Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon get," said Harry quickly. "And what about Hermione?"

Mrs. Weasley practically wrung her hands.

"Listen, Harry, dear," she said as she placed the tray on his lap, "Ron and Hermione will be here in a few hours. They're taking the Knight Bus. Hated to let them come by themselves, but with the rest of the Order on…." She paused, flustered again. "Oh never mind! They'll explain everything, Harry. Just eat your lunch and then how about another nap?"

Fortunately, the smell of the food and the promise of a visit from Ron and Hermione were enough to buoy his spirits and he let Mrs. Weasley off the hook—for now. Whatever had happened, he would find out from Hermione. Mrs. Weasley returned to her book as he chewed on his roast pork and potatoes. His accident must have been in the paper, he figured. Maybe they were worried that the
Death Eaters would find out he was hurt by reading the *Surrey Advertiser*. He smiled at that. It couldn't be that bad, really, could it?

Madam Pomfrey bustled in soon after he finished his lunch. She pulled down the sheets that covered his legs and waved her wand over them.

"Wiggle your toes now, dear," she commanded. Harry was relieved to find that they did, indeed, still work. They felt strangely stiff. He doubted he'd ever before had stiff toes.

"Now make fists and hold them," she instructed. He tried to keep his face neutral as pain shot up his injured arm but she wasn't fooled.

"Ahh, still hurting you, is it?" she asked. "Bad cut, and deep. It was quite a dirty wound—those hub caps are full of grease and dirt…"

"Hub caps," Harry corrected softly, looking at his arm. Apparently, it had been sliced open by one of his uncle's designer hub caps, the ones Harry used to polish every weekend.

Before she left, Madam Pomfrey actually got Harry up on his feet. He stood there, quite unsteady and decidedly wobbly, and not without a good deal of pain. Still, he couldn't help but realize that he would have been flat on his back for weeks or even months if he'd been taken to a Muggle hospital.

"Isn't it a little soon?" he asked as she asked him to take a couple practice steps. "After all, it's only been a day since the accident. . ."

Madam Pomfrey glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

"A day, Harry?" she replied. "Three days more like. Healing bones is hard work for healer and patient. Professor Snape's sleeping draughts kept you quite safe and tight in bed while your bones did the hard work."

"Three days?" he asked, disbelievingly. Snape was probably doing cartwheels of glee in the dungeons at the prospect of keeping him comatose for even longer. As she helped him back in bed, everything felt different. He wanted to grill Mrs. Weasley again, but the good food and the small amount of exercise had taken their toll. He settled back against the pillows and closed his eyes. Sleep came fast, and this time, it was peacefully dreamless.

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Chapter 3

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BELATED BIRTHDAY

Harry awoke to voices outside in the corridor.

"Did you see that one? Down on her hands and knees scrubbing the flagstones! It almost makes me sick!"

"Hermione, you just have to let it go. They're house elves. They *like* to work. It's what they do."

Harry opened his eyes and grinned. It was like old times . . . Hermione complaining about the enslavement of the house elves and arguing with Ron.

"And wearing nothing but tea towels!" continued Hermione.
"They're not deaf, you know," hissed Ron. "They can hear you and I imagine they're quite insulted."

"You two!" said a third voice. "Going on like an old married couple. You've probably woken Harry up by now."

"Good, then," replied Ron to his sister. "He'll want to be awake to see us anyway. I expect he's had enough lying about."

"Would you quit arguing and come in?" called Harry, the smile still plastered on his face.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, hurrying over to his bed, Ginny and Ron on her heels. She looked like she wanted to hug him, but didn't know where to put her hands as his arm was bandaged up to his shoulder. She settled for kissing him on the cheek.

"You look so much better!" exclaimed Ginny as she stood beside Hermione. Ron shot her a warning glance but it was too late.

"Better?" asked Harry. "Better than when?" As far as he could remember, he hadn't seen Ginny since getting off the Hogwarts Express more than a month ago.

Ginny and Ron maneuvered themselves behind Hermione, nodding encouragingly at her.

"Well, Harry," she began. "Better than your picture. From the accident."

"Picture?" he asked, his voice rising uncomfortably. "What picture? I don't remember anyone taking a picture…"

"Well, you wouldn't now, would you?" replied Hermione. "You were obviously in quite a bit of pain. And it was daylight still so there wouldn't have been a flash."

"This wouldn't be about the article in the Advertiser that Mrs. Weasley mentioned, would it?" he asked. "She didn't mention a picture." He looked from one face to another. All three of them looked like they knew a lot more than they were saying, and certainly a lot more than he knew.

"It wouldn't have been so bad, really," said Hermione, "if that local reporter hadn't been driving by. The pictures were so … um… vivid… that the Times picked up the story, see . . ."

"The Times? The London Times?" he asked, incredulous. He vaguely remembered a car arriving, the sound of a slamming car door, sometime after the accident.

Hermione nodded her head. Ron and Ginny looked uncomfortable.

"What did it say?" he asked. The butterflies in his stomach were having a field day. "The article, I mean."

"Just that you were accidentally run over by your uncle's car and according to your aunt and uncle you're recuperating with family friends in the country. It made them…the Dursleys…seem…." She stopped as Ron and Ginny glared at her. 'Well, never mind." She reached down and smoothed Harry's covers.

Harry was shaking his head in disbelief.

"Did it mention my name, by any chance? Or where I live?"

Hermione bit her lip. She looked at Ron and Ginny for support, but they were doing their best to appear invisible.
"Well?" asked Harry again. "I guess that's a yes, then?"

"Your name, and where you live, and your aunt and uncle's names," she replied.

"Oh." It was all he could muster. "Could you tell it was me in the picture, then?"

"Well, you see, the scar and all...." answered Ginny, rather lamely.

Without thinking, Harry reached up and brushed his hair down over his forehead.

"And who took this picture? Do you have it with you?" Harry was becoming more and more dejected and Ron stepped in to cheer him up.

"It's really funny, Harry. You've got these great big jeans on tied around your waist with an old rope and your legs are sticking out at funny angles. Then there's the fluffy pink afghan!"

"Ron!" hissed Hermione. Ginny rolled her eyes.

"One of the feature writers for the *Surrey Advertiser* lives in your neighborhood, Harry," explained Hermione. "She drove by right after the accident happened. She got out to investigate and ended up with one of those human interest stories for the features section."

"Human interest story?" said Harry. "Pain from magical curse scar cripples boy and causes him to fall in front of uncle's moving car?"

"Oh, Harry, we knew you'd be upset. You can't imagine what it did to me opening up the *Times* of all things and seeing your picture and reading about how the Dursleys had saved you after your parents died and had taken you in as a second son..."

"Second son!" The look in his eyes would have wilted roses.

"There was a picture of Dudley and you when you were about two..."

Harry closed his eyes and forced his mind back to the nagging thing in the back of his mind.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Do wizards read Muggle newspapers?"

Hermione, Ron and Ginny exchanged glances.

"Well, most don't," said Ginny, almost apologetically.

"Most?" questioned Harry.

"But some do," she continued. "Dad does, sometimes."

"May as well just spill it, mate," said Ron, pulling something from his pocket and dropping it on the bed in front of Harry. "This is what's caused all the noise."

Harry looked down at a folded up copy of the wizarding newspaper, *The Daily Prophet*. He unfolded it and almost dropped it in shock. There, on the front page, was a picture of himself, lying on the street, wrapped in a vividly pink blood-stained floral afghan, his glasses askew. A crowd of people jostled around him, and his own head was moving back and forth as if he was moaning in pain. The headline read "Where's Harry?" This picture clearly showed his scar.

"Don't worry, Harry," said Hermione. "The Order has it all under control. Well, at least we think they do. They really haven't told us much. Ginny and Ron got most of what we know from
overhearing Bill and Charlie talking at the Burrow."

Ginny sat on the edge of the bed. Harry looked at her with new appreciation. She didn't look half as scared as Ron and Hermione did. He wasn't sure if the difference was that she wasn't as afraid of him or if she just wasn't as scared in general.

"I know you're worried, Harry. Dad told Ron and me that they're doubling the guard on your relatives' house. This wasn't your fault at all, and you're safe here at Hogwarts. It was just a stupid accident."

Harry looked up at her, not feeling at all better. Hadn't he had enough stupid accidents?

"They've practically got my address now," he said. "And it won't take much to figure out where I am now, will it?"

"No, not really," she admitted. "Dad says the Prophet has already met with Dumbledore and he released some kind of statement. It should be in tomorrow's paper. They wanted another picture of you but Dumbledore refused."

"Could have asked me, of course," grumbled Harry. "It is my face."

"Well, that's just it, isn't it?" said Hermione a little sarcastically, "you've not exactly been available for interviews, Harry."

Harry let himself smile, though it didn't exactly light up his face.

"Hey, I'm sorry. It's just a little much all at once, you know? First I find out that I've been unconscious for three days and the next thing I know my picture is in three newspapers and everyone and their grandma knows that Harry Potter lives in Little Whinging in the summer. Don't think we're going to be able to use that ancient magic stuff anymore so I'll be safe with the Dursleys."

"Harry, there's one more thing," said Ginny. Her tone told him that this one more thing would not be anything good.

Harry closed his eyes. "Alright, what else?"

"The picture in the Prophet . . ."

He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"What? You want me to autograph it?"

"Harry! This is serious. It's Bill. You can see him in the picture."

"What?" Harry picked up the paper again and looked hard. The people around him continued to jostle each other. He could see a few of the neighbors (he didn't even realize they had been there) and a part of Dudley (not all of him would fit in the picture). And yes, leaning in next to his head was a young man with red hair pulled back in a ponytail. His face couldn't be seen very clearly, but the red hair and fang earring were pretty easily discernible. Harry dropped the paper. An indescribable feeling was overtaking him, a feeling of helplessly sinking lower and lower. He looked off to a spot on the far wall somewhere between Ron and Hermione. He was trying very hard not to cry. If only he could muster up the anger he'd felt all last year—that usually kept away the tears. But today he just felt sad. Incurably sad. Hermione had a full-time guard at her house, the Dursley's had a double guard, and now Bill's participation in the Order may have endangered not only his life, but probably the entire Weasley family. And Sirius…Sirius was dead and wasn't coming back.
"You alright, Harry?" asked Ginny. Harry looked at her. She was still seated on the edge of his bed and Ron and Hermione were still standing. He noticed, rather curiously in an out-of-body sort of way, that Hermione was clutching Ron's hand and that all three of them looked almost as sad and worried as he felt.

"No," he admitted. "I'm not alright. Nothing's alright. What's happening with Bill, first of all?"

"We haven't been told, Harry," answered Ginny. "But listen, Bill knew exactly what he was getting into when he joined the Order. And being at the scene of your accident doesn't exactly expose him as a member of the Order, now, does it? It's not unreasonable for someone to look out for a friend of the family, is it?"

"I know what you're thinking, Harry," said Ron. Harry looked up at him. It wasn't like Ron to jump in with something serious. Harry glanced down. Yep. Ron was still clutching Hermione's hand. Or she was clutching his. It was hard to tell.

"Fine. What am I thinking, Ron?" asked Harry. He wasn't challenging his friend, and his voice was more resigned than sarcastic.

"You're thinking that you're putting us all in danger," said Ron. "And you're not. So just quit thinking that. Yeah, Vo…" he stopped, cleared his throat. "Vo…Voldemort might want to get rid of you and all, but don't think he'd stop at that."

"We're stronger because of you, Harry," said Ginny. She surprised him by reaching up and pushing his bangs back from his forehead, exposing his scar. "We all are." She looked back at Ron and Hermione for confirmation. They were both nodding. She, too, apparently saw their clasped hands, because when she turned back to Harry, she had a small smirk on her face and she rolled her eyes at him. Harry's face stretched into a smile.

"Stronger joined together, then, eh?" said Harry, stretching out his good arm to Ginny.

Ginny took his hand and reached out her other to Ron. Ron took it rather awkwardly, and looked over to Hermione. His ears turned pink as they looked at each other, realizing their hands were already joined.

"Together, then," said Hermione, finishing the circle by lightly grasping Harry's other hand. "No matter what comes."

They stayed like that for a moment more, hands joined, saying nothing. "For Sirius," whispered Harry as he squeezed Ginny and Hermione's hands. They squeezed back, each muttering "For Sirius." A noise at the door just then ended the moment of solidarity.

"I believe Mr. Potter has a party waiting for him," said Professor McGonagall, coming into the room followed by Hagrid, who squeezed in pushing a wheeled contraption that looked nothing like a standard Muggle wheelchair.

"Party?" Harry asked, giving Hagrid a confused smile. "For getting run over by a car?"

"Nah," said Hagrid. "For getting better. And for turnin’ 16."

"16?" He looked back at his friends. "What day is this, anyway?"

"August 1st," answered Hermione. "Happy belated birthday, Harry!"
A/N: Snape and Harry are coming…but not until Chapter 10. Hope you can be patient ’til then.

HATS, CRACKERS, PRESENTS

Madam Pomfrey bustled in behind Hagrid and Professor McGonagall and supervised getting Harry moved into the wizard wheelchair. Harry found that the biggest problem he had wasn’t his legs, but his injured right arm. He easily moved his legs around so they dangled off the bed. But he couldn’t yet use his arm to help push himself up, and straightening it out was incredibly painful. He got to his feet with Ron’s help and managed to stay upright and balanced—though Ron hovered around him, clearly doubting that he was capable of standing on his own—while Hagrid brought the chair around. The chair was much narrower than a Muggle wheelchair, and had far more wheels on it. Harry didn’t ask what they did, though he coughed a bit nervously as they left the room and approached the first staircase. Hermione caught his eye and shrugged. No one else looked the least bit concerned.

Ron was currently "driving" the chair, as Hagrid had had to bend down nearly double to push it. He pushed Harry right to the stairs and, hardly slowing down at all, continued right over the edge of the top stair. Miraculously, the wheelchair stayed upright and level and simply rolled down to the landing. Harry caught Hermione staring at the side of the chair, studying it. But she soon gave up trying to figure out how it worked and hurried to catch up with them.

They went up staircases and down staircases, almost as if trying to confuse Harry. But eventually, he knew where they were going.

"The Room of Requirement," he said softly as a door, decorated with colored streamers and balloons, suddenly popped into view.

"Surprise!" yelled a number of voices as Ron pushed Harry through the door. Everyone started clapping and Harry was surprised that the party consisted of at least twenty people, some of them quite unexpected. Most of the guests were already seated, as the table had an intricately drawn place card for each guest, a surprising party hat in each chair, and a variety of party favors and crackers at each place.

Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood sat together at one end of the table. Harry waved to them and they waved back, looking a bit embarrassed. Fred Weasley sat next to Neville, but George sat at the other end of the table altogether.

"Can't figure out why the room doesn't want us together, Harry," called George. Harry grinned. "Every time we try to move my place card, the chair boots me back here."

"Something wrong with the company down here, George?" asked Tonks. The young Auror, sporting a lime green bowler hat just like Cornelius Fudges’, sat between George and Remus Lupin. Lupin’s hat was an entire model of the solar system that spun around this head, while George’s transformed his head into a giant yellow canary.

Harry stood with a little help from Ron and slid into his own chair. Hermione had moved his hat and as soon as he sat down, placed it on his head. It was shaped like a giant set of antlers, decorated with multi-colored twinkling lights.

Dobby the house elf, Albus Dumbledore, Hagrid, Madam Pomfrey, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,
Professor McGonagall, Mrs. Figg and Bill and Charlie Weasley rounded out the group.

"I am not wearing this hat," said Ron as he sat down next to Harry, looking hatefully at the hat the room had chosen for him.

"It's fine," said Harry, not even trying to suppress a laugh. "It's you, Ron, really."

The hat was shaped like the body of a giant spider, and the eight legs, unnaturally long, moved on their own accord, waving around the hat like twitching nerve endings.

"If you put it on, you won’t have to look at it," said Hermione. She had already put on her hat, which looked like a precariously balanced stack of books. It suited her perfectly. The top-most book, to Harry's delight, had "Hogwarts, A History" emblazoned across the spine.

"Fine!" said Ron, shoving the hat on his head.

Ginny, who was seated on Harry's left, next to Mrs. Figg, picked up her hat and laughed. The hat was shaped like a belfry and miniature bats zoomed in and out, circling the hat.

"I think the room remembers how good you are at the Bat Bogey Hex," said Harry.

Ginny placed the hat on her head and all heads turned to Fred Weasley, who had stood up and was tapping on his water glass with a spoon.

"I hate to break up all your fun," he said as his hat, an almost perfect replica of Ludo Bagman, repeated everything he said... in Bulgarian.

"But it's Harry's sixteenth birthday. Well, it was his birthday, and we tried to have the party yesterday, but seeing as Harry was sleeping, we ate all his cake and rescheduled."

Everyone laughed, the hat finished the translation and Fred continued.

"Anyway, we're glad you're on your feet again, Harry. Let's eat!"

The table was suddenly laden with food and the guests dug in. Harry worked himself through a turkey leg, two pieces of chicken and some shepherd's pie before tasting the broccoli casserole, candied yams and roasted herb potatoes.

"Try a cracker with me, Harry," said Ron, his mouth full of potatoes. He held out a cracker wrapped in gold foil. Harry pulled one end while Ron held the other and out popped a miniature snitch with bright gold wings. It took off and zoomed around the room for a full five minutes before Harry, showing amazing reflexes despite his injuries, stuck his good arm up in the air suddenly and nabbed it.

"My turn now," said Hermione. She'd worked her way to the Yorkshire Pudding but grabbed another cracker off the table and held it out over Ron's plate so Harry could take hold of one end.

Harry obligingly pulled. With a loud snap a glittering swarm of gold galleons took flight on tiny, enchanted wings. They hovered and swooped, causing general havoc, until all had been nabbed by the guests.

Ron looked at his catch doubtfully.

"It's not leprechaun gold, is it?" he asked.

From the other end of the table, a loud "Oh!" was heard as Neville and Luna pulled a cracker
together. A rainbow stretched from one end of the table to the other, and a shower of lemon drops rained down from it for a few seconds until the whole thing disappeared.

Professor Dumbledore looked delighted. He popped a lemon drop in his mouth and offered another to Mrs. Figg.

When everyone had eaten their fill, including cake and ice cream, and when all the crackers were gone, everyone stood up and the table disappeared with a pop. Comfortable chairs appeared where the table had been, and Harry was led to a plump chair with an ottoman where he could rest with his feet up.

"Presents!" exclaimed Mrs. Weasley, wheeling over a very full cart.

Harry looked at the cart full of gifts, at the room full of his friends, and felt he couldn't take it all. All of this, just for him. For the one who was causing all the pain and problems to begin with. He knew he shouldn't feel that way, and that no one in the room truly believed that it was his fault. But still….

He shook off the feeling and accepted the first present Mrs. Weasley placed in his hands.

This present set the tone for the rest of the evening. It was a hand-knitted pink afghan, with flowers and ruffles, almost exactly like the one a helpful neighbor had given Bill to wrap around him after the accident.

"We never knew you liked pink so well," said George as Harry gazed at the afghan with a very strange look on his face.

Harry shook his head and cracked a smile. He draped the blanket around his shoulders, got a few cheers for doing so, and went on.

Before long he had a set of rear-view mirrors for his glasses, a pair of sturdy shin guards for his legs, a hub cap off of a real Muggle car (or so said Tonks), a pair of Muggle crutches, and his own dragon claw earring. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gave him a pair of jeans and a Weasley Wizard Wheezes T-shirt featuring a magical moving graphic of a boy turning into a canary after eating one of the twins' Canary Creams. He loved the clothes—probably the first real clothes he'd ever had that hadn't been Dudley's first.

Dobby's gift, as expected, was once again socks.

"Dobby made them himself, of course," explained Dobby. He was unusually upbeat. Harry suspected he may have had one Butterbeer too many. There were four pair, each sock a different color and knitted with a different pattern.

"Eight socks!" explained Dobby. "Many ways to combine them. Nothing boring for Harry Potter!" He hiccupped and sat down again.

Hagrid, wearing a giant hat that looked like the business end of a blast-ended skrewt that occasionally belched smoke and sparks, grinned as Harry opened his present.

"Thanks, Hagrid," laughed Harry as he held up a dog-eared copy of First Aid the Wizard Way.

The last package Harry opened was from Professor McGonagall. "Something from me other than extra homework," she said to the crowd. Everyone laughed then cheered loudly as Harry held up a new Quidditch robe with the word "Captain" emblazoned on the back above the Gryffindor lion.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" exclaimed Ron.
"Ronald!" protested Mrs. Weasley. "Language!"

"But he's back on, don't you see?" exclaimed Ron, clearly as excited as Harry about this unexpected turn of events. "Umbridge canned him for life, don't you remember?"

Harry noted that no one corrected Ron and made him say "Professor Umbridge."

"We've decided to overturn a few of her decisions," stated Professor McGonagall loftily. "Harry, you are no longer banned from Quidditch. I have high expectations for the Gryffindor team this year, and it looks like we'll continue the tradition of having two Weasleys on the team." She looked meaningfully at Ginny and Ron. Both had made the team last year after Fred, George and Harry had been banned.

Harry was as happy as he'd been in a long time. Surrounded by his friends, he felt not only loved, but safe. He had the very certain feeling that they were there because they wanted to be, because they did indeed like him, despite the danger he might present to them.

But the party had gone on quite a long time, and as if on cue, the visitors started getting ready to go. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gathered up Luna and Neville, who they were escorting home via the Knight Bus, and said their goodbyes. Fred, George, Bill and Charlie left right afterward, telling Harry they would see him soon. Tonks hugged him goodbye. "Stay away from Muggle cars," she said. "No more scares like that." Hagrid winked and said "See ya around, Harry."

At last, everyone was gone but Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Professor Dumbledore. The headmaster lingered by the door where he had just had a whispered conversation with Madam Pomfrey. Madam Pomfrey had left, looking not too pleased, and Dumbledore settled down on a squashy chair across from the students.

"Gone at last," he said with a smile. "I hope the party made up for our decision to let you sleep through your birthday, Harry?"

"Yes, sir, it did," Harry said sincerely. "It was a great party."

"And how are you feeling?" he asked. "Up for a bit of a talk?"

Harry glanced at his friends. He was still sitting on the chair with his feet propped up on the ottoman. Hermione sat to his left in a squashy chair, the twin to Dumbledore's, and Ron was stretched out on the floor with his elbows on a pillow. Ginny sat on Harry's right, curled up in her chair. She looked tired but interested.

"All of us, sir?" he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "All of you."

Chapter 5

A/N: Slow exposition chapter…necessary for plot…

THE FIRST PLAN

"By now, I'm sure your friends have told you about the articles in the Muggle papers and in the
"Daily Prophet," said Dumbledore, pausing to look at Harry for confirmation.

"They told me," said Harry. "I'm glad I slept through it all."

Dumbledore smiled. "Well, given the circumstances, and to help you complete your recovery, I feel it's best that you spend another week here at Hogwarts, Harry. I've issued a statement to the Prophet that you are quite safe and recuperating nicely."

"Right…in the country with family friends," muttered Harry. It suddenly occurred to him that the Dursleys didn't actually have any family friends. Uncle Vernon had business associates, and of course there was Aunt Marge, but no one else seemed to want to voluntarily spend time with the Dursleys, including Harry himself.

"Actually, Harry," answered Dumbledore, ignoring Harry's well-aimed poke at the Dursleys, "I have not revealed your location. However…now, what is that Muggle phrase? Oh yes—it would not take a rocket scientist to figure out that you are at Hogwarts." Ron and Ginny looked at each other and shrugged.

Harry considered. A week. That would still leave three weeks until the term started. "So, I stay here for another week, then. Where to after that?" he asked carefully.

Dumbledore picked up a gold coin left from a cracker and turned it over several times in his hand. At last he replied.

"I can't say yet, Harry. Perhaps to the Burrow with the Weasleys, or perhaps to some vacation spot with Miss Granger's family. I cannot promise that, though. We may have to resort to number twelve Grimmauld Place or..." he hesitated.

Harry's face fell and he found himself studying his hands.

"…or another secure location. You'll have some company, at least while you are here at Hogwarts. Your friends' parents have agreed to let them stay with you, and Hagrid has promised to keep an eye on you when Professor Snape and I are not on the premises."

"Snape?" The protest escaped his lips unbidden.

"Professor Snape is my second during the summer here at Hogwarts, Harry. Professor McGonagall is only here for a day or two—she will be leaving very soon." He fixed Harry with a steady, serious gaze and Harry knew he would not like what the Headmaster was about to say. "Harry, you would be wise to consider building bridges with Professor Snape. He will be instrumental in the fight against Voldemort and you will need his assistance." He held up a hand to forestall the protest he knew was coming. "I have asked the same of Severus. I am not saying it will be easy…for either of you…but you can begin by showing him the respect any professor should receive and referring to him by his title, a title he earned at an earlier age than any professor in the history of this school."

Harry glanced over at his friends. Ron's mouth was hanging open—he looked like he was definitely feeling Harry's pain. Hermione, on the other hand, looked impressed by this bit of news and was nodding her head in agreement with the Headmaster. Harry decided that no reaction was the best course and changed directions.

"What about the Order?" asked Harry. "I mean…Bill, and all…"

"There have been questions, yes," said Dumbledore. "The Ministry has long wanted a guard on you and now suspects I am up to something behind their backs, which may be interpreted as a lack of trust of the Ministry on my part. A valid interpretation, I might add. But as you are a known close
friend of the Weasleys, it has been explained that various members of the Weasley family check in on you from time to time over the summer."

Harry was not unaware that Professor Dumbledore was attempting to be honest, even though he was still making decisions for him. He didn't quite believe that the Ministry would fall for the "Bill just happened to be there when Harry was run over by his uncle" story, but it was certainly better that Bill had been photographed rather than one of the Aurors like Tonks or Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"What about the Dursleys, then," he asked. "Are they safe?"

"We have a double watch on the house on Privet Drive, around the clock," answered Dumbledore. "There's been nothing suspicious yet. So, yes, they are safe. Safe from evil wizards anyway."

"But not safe enough to send me back there?" he asked, daring to meet Dumbledore's eyes.

"No, Harry, I'm afraid not," answered Dumbledore. "There is every reason to believe that the enemy could now locate you at your aunt and uncle's home. And furthermore, they now know that you aren't in top physical form. So you will not return there, not this summer, anyway."

"Professor, why all four of us?" asked Harry. He didn't have a problem with spending time with his best friends. In fact, with the recent hand-holding he'd witnessed between Ron and Hermione, he was rather glad that Ginny had come along too. "Aren't any of us safe outside of Hogwarts?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry then at the others, his blue eyes beginning to twinkle just a bit. "The Order feels that keeping you all together for a time will cut down considerably on the number of owls you'll be tempted to send from one to the other. So the only new restrictions you have here are no leaving the grounds of Hogwarts, and no owls. I can take messages directly to your parents, Mr. and Ms. Weasley, and can even drop a letter in the Muggle post to yours, Ms. Granger. Any communication to any Order member can be given directly to me and I'll deliver it personally." He stood up then and the comfortable chair he was sitting on popped out of existence.

"And now, it's late. Harry, it's back to the hospital wing for you. Madam Pomfrey will have my head if I keep you here much longer. The rest of you will be staying in our school's visitor guest rooms during your stay. They are conveniently located close to the hospital wing and your things have already been delivered there."

"By house elves," mouthed Ron to Hermione.

Ginny helped Harry back into the strange wheelchair and together they left the room. Dumbledore took one last look around the room then whispered "Nox" as he closed the door behind them.

Chapter 6

BACK ON HIS FEET

When Harry opened his eyes the next morning, sunlight was already streaming across his bed. He found his glasses on the bedside table and put them on. Madam Pomfrey had dosed him heavily with one last dose of Skele-Gro and several regenerative potions the night before. He heard muffled voices and turned his head toward them. He could just see Madam Pomfrey talking with someone whose back was turned. Someone with long, greasy black hair.
Snape.

Seeing Snape gave him a nagging feeling that he was forgetting something, something important. But he couldn't quite place it, and Snape turned to leave just as Hermione and Ginny came in.

"Mr. Potter," he said, nodding stiffly at Harry as he passed his bed. Hermione and Ginny had stepped back to let him pass and all three watched as he pushed through the door into the corridor.

"Morning, Harry," said Hermione, turning back to him. Ginny was still looking back toward Snape, a small frown on her face.

"Morning," he said. He wished they had waited a few more minutes to get there—he really had to use the loo. He looked hopefully over in Madam Pomfrey's direction and caught her looking right at him.

"Think you can use those legs this morning, Mr. Potter?" she asked as she made her way briskly to his bed. "I imagine you'd like to go freshen up a bit?"

Harry smiled his thanks at her. "Yeah, great," he replied. He moved his legs experimentally and was relieved to find that they were less stiff than yesterday and didn't hurt as much at all. His injured arm was still tied against his body in a sling and he felt slightly off balance as Hermione and Madam Pomfrey supported him as he stood.

Madam Pomfrey led him to the bathroom while the girls waited by the bed, chatting amicably. When Harry returned, Madam Pomfrey helped him into a chair and began to unwrap his bandaged arm.

"Where's Ron?" asked Harry, wincing a bit as she poured something on the wound left by the hub cap. The flesh was nearly closed, at least, though the skin felt tight and the muscles weak. Smoke rose from the cut and Ginny raised her eyes in alarm.

"Sleeping, the lazy lout," answered Hermione, eying the smoke with apparent interest but not commenting on it. "I practically jumped on him to wake him but he . . . " She stopped mid-sentence as both Ginny and Harry swiveled their heads to stare at her.

"You two! You know what I mean!"

"Do we?" asked Harry, shooting Ginny a knowing look.

"Yes! You both know how hard he is to wake up!"

A devilish grin appeared on Ginny's face. "Yes we do, Hermione. Because he's my brother and Harry's roommate. So how do YOU know that he's hard to wake up?"

Hermione was turning a lovely shade of Weasley red. She was saved from further embarrassment by the sudden appearance of a disheveled looking Ron at the door.

"We're going to miss breakfast if you don't hurry," he said, checking his wristwatch.

"You'll have plenty of time," answered Madam Pomfrey. She had finished wrapping up Harry's arm again and tucking it into the sling. "Just go to the Great Hall and the elves will send something up. And take care with Mr. Potter. He can have a go on his legs today, but take care on the stairs. Mr. Weasley, why don't you help him with his clothes? I don't think he'd like to wander about the castle wearing his pyjamas."

"I can go then?" asked Harry, a smile beginning to creep across his face.
"You may," she answered. "But please take it slowly. Your legs have responded very well to the treatment—all you need now is to rebuild your strength. Go out to the grounds and get some sun. And relax!"

"The Quidditch pitch!" exclaimed Ron.

"No Quidditch!" said Madam Pomfrey giving Ron a death glare. "As I recall, Mr. Weasley, you've recently had a rather serious injury yourself. Perhaps I should take a look . . ."

Ron's face fell as he backed away from her. "No, no, I'm perfectly fine, thanks. We'll behave ourselves...take it easy."

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "Well then, what are you waiting for? Help Mr. Potter get dressed and get out in the sun! And keep the arm dry, Mr. Potter. No cavorting with the giant squid just yet." She winked at them then bustled away back to her office. Ron breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He turned to his friend and helped him remove the sling and work his pyjama top over his re-bandaged arm. Harry, however, had lost his bright look and was gazing absently out the window.

"I'm sorry about that, you know," he said, still not looking at Ron.

"Sorry about what, mate?" asked Ron, looking puzzled as he finally got Harry's arm out of his pajama sleeve.

Harry sighed and bit his bottom lip. He didn't want to think about it, but Madam Pomfrey's comment had brought it all back, reminding him that Ron, Ginny and Hermione had all been injured less than two months ago at the Department of Mysteries, following Harry on what turned out to be not much more than a wild goose chase.

"He's sorry about what happened at the Department of Mysteries," said Hermione from the door, her voice rather quiet.

Ron paused with Harry's t-shirt in his hands and looked back at Hermione. She and Ginny were standing side by side in the doorway, both of them looking serious. He frowned.

"Don't think about that," he said, turning back to Harry. "It wasn't your fault and you know it."

Harry looked at Ron, noticing that for the second summer day in a row, he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. He opened his mouth to ask a question when Ron suddenly pulled Harry's t-shirt down over his head.

"Don't ask," he said firmly. "I'm alright and I'd do it all again in a second." He glanced over at Hermione and Ginny. Both of them looked rather surprised and he imagined they approved of how he was handling the situation. They had all discussed this, of course, on the Knight Bus on the way to Hogwarts. They were sure that Harry blamed himself for what had happened in June in the Department of Mysteries and were determined that they wouldn't let him wallow in it or turn them away in a misguided attempt to protect them. Ron started working Harry's injured arm through the sleeve hole, studiously avoiding looking his friend in the eye.

"Ron's perfectly fine," said Ginny. "He's as annoying as ever and maybe even a little bit smarter. Seems the brains rubbed off on him a bit." Ron stuck his tongue out at her and she responded in kind. She and Hermione wandered out into the hallway as Ron helped Harry with his jeans and trainers.

Harry stood up and wobbled a little as his legs got accustomed to his weight again. Ron put his arm around his shoulders.
"Steady there, mate," he said as they walked together toward the door. Hermione took Harry's other side, tucking her arm around his waist.

"Where to first?" he asked.

"Breakfast!" said Ron.

They laughed and walked, four abreast, to the Great Hall.

Chapter 7

A/N: Thanks for your patience with the Harry/Snape mentor relationship. It really gets underway in chapter 10, but you will see hints popping up before then.

MEMORIES OF THE PORTKEY

Harry never knew the sun could feel so good.

After breakfast, Ginny coaxed a blanket from a house elf. They made their way slowly across the grounds to the lakeside, and Ginny spread the blanket out on the ground.

Ron dropped down on the blanket and lay down with his hands behind his head, looking up at the clouds. Hermione sat down next to him while Ginny kicked off her shoes and wandered down to the lake, wading in the shallow water at the edge. Harry eased himself down next to Ron and stretched out his legs, soaking in the still gentle morning sun.

"We've missed you this summer, Harry," said Hermione, looking over at him and smiling. "I was worried about you." She didn't say why she was worried, but Harry understood.

"He owled us plenty of times, Hermione," said Ron. "But I know why you were worried—he wanted books!"

Hermione shook her head. "Ronald Weasley, you are now the only one who hasn't read *Hogwarts, a History.*"

"And if I had," he said in a mock sing-song voice, "I'd know that you can't Apparate on the grounds of Hogwarts!"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"If I could Apparate right now I'd go to Hogsmeade for four butterbeers," said Ginny. She had joined them on the blanket and was wiping sand off of her bare feet.

Hermione smiled suddenly.

"Only one more month for me!" she said. "I'll be the first old enough to Apparate."

"You know," said Ron, sitting up and untying his trainers, "They brought Harry here by Portkey instead of Apparating."

Harry furrowed his brow as Hermione and Ginny stared at him.
"That's ridiculous, Ronald," countered Hermione. "You need a permit for a Portkey. And Harry
couldn't stand or move on his own. How could you Portkey while holding onto someone who's
incapacitated? Think about the landing!"

"No, he's right," said Harry, speaking softly. He couldn't believe he hadn't remembered. Somehow,
in the pain and confusion and three days of sleep after the accident, he'd completely forgotten the fact
that Snape had held him while they transported magically to Hogwarts' gates.

"I heard Dad and Bill telling Mom about it," said Ron with a nod to Harry.

"Telling Mom about what?" asked Ginny.

"Someone Portkeyed with me back to Hogwarts, after the accident. They couldn't take me by Floo
because of my injuries and Dumbledore seemed afraid to let them Apparate with me…"

"Portkeyed holding you?" said Hermione in an almost unnatural, high-pitched voice. "But Harry,
that's practically impossible! And it's incredibly dangerous too. Hardly anyone even dares…only
with babies under extreme emergencies!"

"Hermione…." said Ron warningly. "There was no other way. They had to get him back here. The
Muggles wanted to call an ambulant."

"Ambulance," corrected Harry automatically.

"It must have been Dumbledore," said Hermione, going on despite Ron's warning. "He'd risk it for
Harry."

"It wasn't Dumbledore," said Harry shortly. "It was Snape. And I didn't know it was so dangerous. I
wasn't exactly thinking clearly."

"Snape?" exclaimed Ginny. "Snape risked his life for you?"

They were all staring at Ginny now.

"Sorry," she said, covering up her mouth. "I was just surprised, that's all."

Hermione stared open-mouthed at Harry. She shook her head disbelievingly.

"I can't figure it out either," said Harry. "I don't remember it all clearly, just that they told me to keep
my head against him." He could still remember the feel of the smooth black fabric, how pressing his
head into it had seemed to help the pain.

"That must have been hard," said Ginny.

Harry smiled over at her. "Not really."

"I was in the kitchen when Bill and Dad got home," said Ron helpfully. "None of us knew anything
had happened until they popped in and Dad called up the stairs for Mum. He had that voice…"

"The 'don't alarm the children' voice," explained Ginny, rolling her eyes.

"We didn't even know Bill had been on guard duty," said Ron. "I mean, it made sense that they were
watching out for Harry, but who would have thought they had a guard on Hermione's house too?"

"What?" Hermione swiveled her head to stare at Ron. "My house? What are you talking about,
Ronald?"
Ron leaned back out of Hermione's reach. "Hey, I thought you knew!"

Hermione deflated a bit. All illusions of safety were gone now. Harry looked dejected.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said with an apologetic smile.

"You know, this is really more funny than it sounds," said Ginny with a laugh. "Think about it. Harry gets run over by his uncle. He gets saved by Snape! And in the meantime, Hermione is being stalked by Mundungus Fletcher!"

"Ick!" exclaimed Hermione.

"Anyway," continued Ron, speaking loudly through Ginny and Hermione's laughter, "When we heard Dad call Mum, Ginny and I were there in an instant. When they saw us, Dad just sighed. 'Something's happened to Harry,' I said."

"We both just knew it," said Ginny. She glanced over at Harry and he saw a hint of worry in her eyes that he knew he wouldn't have seen before the Department of Mysteries.

"Dad told us what had happened and that you were going to be fine, mate," said Ron. "They sent Ginny and me upstairs but I snuck down and sat on the stairs. That's when I heard about Snape Portkeying with you. Mum, Dad and Bill were practically awestruck by it. I cornered Bill about it later—he asked me what I did with my hands when we Portkeyed to the Quidditch World Cup last summer. I said how should I know? It's not like you have control of yourself when you Portkey. He said "Exactly!" And I got it then—whatever you are holding might stay with you, but it might go flying too."

"There's a whole department at the Ministry devoted to Magical Transportation," contributed Hermione. "There are so many potential mishaps—like splinching, or flooing into a closed fire place. And certain wards can even block Portkey travel, interrupting it before the destination when the witch or wizard may be hundreds of feet above the ground."

"Think about how we landed at the Quidditch World Cup," added Ginny. "Most of us were sprawled all over the ground."

Harry nodded. It felt vaguely uncomfortable knowing his most-hated professor, the man who despised his father, who must have been happy that Sirius had died, had risked his own life to help save Harry's. He didn't like feeling beholden to Snape and wondered again why he had volunteered.

"Snape did it for Dumbledore. Maybe Dumbledore is too old, or maybe Snape didn't want him to get hurt," he said finally. There did seem to be a camaraderie between the two men that Harry had never understood. Saying that Snape did it all for Dumbledore seemed to make it better, put it all back in perspective again and take the focus off of Harry.

"Yeah, mate, whatever," said Ron with a grin. "I get it. I wouldn't want to owe my life to Snape either!"

"Ronald!" said Hermione. Ginny laughed and even Harry let out a chuckle.

"What was it like to Portkey like that, Harry?" asked Hermione as Ron and Ginny waded in the lake water a few minutes later.

"I can't remember," he admitted. "That whole day was kind of blurry. I do remember Remus being there, though, and Bill. I heard Remus Apparate in, right after Bill got to me. Guess Bill was on guard duty and Remus was back-up." He stopped talking a moment, once again thinking he was
forgetting something important.

"Wait a minute," he said. "There were two!"

"Two? Two what?" asked Hermione.

"Two cracks! I was weeding the flowerbed by the curb. I scared a cat out of the mint. A gray cat. Then I heard a crack—it seemed to be right behind me in the yard—then my scar...." He paused and looked at Hermione. Her eyes were wide—with fear? Understanding?

"Someone Apparated before you were hit? Before your scar hurt?"

Harry looked at his hands. This changed everything.

"Harry, it could have been one of your guards."

"No. There were two guards—Bill and Remus. Bill got to me right after the accident, then I heard another crack and Remus showed up. I heard that second crack after I recognized Bill. This was before my scar hurt—right before."

Hermione lowered her voice. "Harry, you have to tell Professor Dumbledore."

Harry sighed. She was right, of course. Everyone assumed that it was coincidence. He'd felt Voldemort's anger, was startled by the cat, fell into the street. But that first crack.... It didn't make sense.

Harry nodded and Hermione forced a small smile.

"Come on, take off your shoes," she said. "Let's see if you can catch tadpoles one-handed."

While they waded in the sandy silt of the lakeshore, movement near the edge of the Forbidden Forest caught Harry's eye. A thestral circled low above the trees. As he watched, it glided back down into the forest. An image came to his mind then—not of riding the thestrals into London—but of Severus Snape, pale and panting, leaning against the bony flank of a leather-winged thestral.

Chapter 8

THE SECOND CRACK

"You guys don't have to come with me," said Harry an hour and a half later as, supported by Hermione on one side and Ginny on the other, with Ron going ahead to open doors, the four students made their way back into the castle.

"We want to go," assured Ginny. Hermione had made Harry repeat the whole story to Ron and Ginny and the four had discussed the mysterious first crack.

"Are you sure there were only four wizards there?" asked Ron. "You weren't exactly with it the whole time."

Harry had shaken his head. "The only ones around me were Bill, Remus, Snape and Dumbledore. There may have been others later." He paused, a bit embarrassed before he looked up at them from behind glasses that had slipped down on his nose. "I...I think they had to modify some memories."
"I don't think they went that far," said Ginny. "Remember the story in the Muggle paper? Someone remembered what happened."

Hermione had nodded in understanding. "I'm sure Bill came up with a good cover story."

"But this first crack you heard," persisted Ginny. "It happened right before your scar started hurting, right?"

"Right," confirmed Harry.

"Do you think..." she said, hesitating, "that it could have been...Bill?"

They all stared at her.

"What?" asked Ron loudly. "Why would Bill make Harry's scar hurt? What are you suggesting?"

Ginny stared at Ron angrily. "Ron, I am not suggesting Bill is a Death Eater! We don't even know that whoever that crack belonged to had anything to do with his scar hurting." She paused and traced her finger in the sand. "Is it possible that Bill Apparated in without knowing that Harry was there and he just happened to get there at the same time everything else happened? He could have startled the cat...."

"Ginny," said Hermione softly, "don't worry about that. Don't you think the Order would always have at least one person on guard duty—actually there on Privet Drive? Bill wouldn't have had to Apparate to get to Harry. He'd have been hiding or under an Invisibility cloak or a Disillusionment spell."

Ginny nodded and looked up.

"But you know, if it wasn't Bill or another member of the Order...." she said.

Ron paled a little.

"You have to tell Dumbledore," he said to Harry. "Hermione's right."

Ginny nodded somberly in agreement.

And now here they were, standing in front of the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Professor Dumbledore's office.

Ron looked at Harry hopefully.

"Don't suppose you know the password, Harry?"

Harry shook his head.

"It's always something like lemon drops or chocolate frogs," he said. He looked at the statue hopefully but it remained in place.

They tried a variety of possibilities without success.

"It's no use," said Hermione finally. "Let's go find one of the other professors. They must have another way of finding him."

"Hey!" said Harry, suddenly remembering the means Dumbledore often used to send messages. He turned to Hermione. "Are there any portraits of old headmasters in this school?"
Hermione looked at Harry as if we were insane.

"Well, in Dumbledore's office to begin with," she said in the sort of tone that said she couldn't believe he hadn't known that.

"I know about those, Hermione," he said. "But are there any anywhere else?"

"Oh. I don't—no, I do know. There's a portrait of one of the previous headmasters in the Entrance Hall. It's rather small—stuck in the corner…"

"Come on!" said Harry, turning around and heading for the Entrance Hall. The other three exchanged glances and followed.

"It's how he gets messages across," explained Harry as they moved down the hallway. Harry's legs were beginning to hurt and his arm throbbed painfully, but he kept moving. "Portraits can visit their other portraits. There are portraits of headmasters in St. Mungo's and the Department of Mysteries too…and at Grimmauld Place." He looked significantly at Ron. "Remember? That's how he was able to check on your dad last year after the attack."

"Brilliant," said Hermione, hurrying ahead of them and leading the way to a portrait which was tucked in a corner to the right of the giant hourglasses that tallied the house points.

"Hello there," she said. The sleeping headmaster opened one eye. "Can you tell Albus Dumbledore that Harry Potter needs to speak with him? It's important."

The old man in the portrait studied her carefully and moved his eyes over to Harry.

"Oh, it's you again, is it?" he said rather haughtily. "Feeling a bit destructive again and wanting to have another go at it?"

Harry started to turn red but he quickly shook his head.

"We can't find Professor Dumbledore and I've remembered something important about my accident a few days ago." He took it on faith that the portraits would already know what had happened on Privet Drive.

"Oh. I see." The portrait raised an eyebrow and looked at the teens again. "All of you need to see him?"

Harry exchanged glances with his friends. He nodded. "Yes, all of us. Can you tell him please?"

The former headmaster considered and then nodded his head. He stood up slowly from the wingback chair he was sitting on and fumbling for his cane, hobbled off to the left and disappeared from the portrait.

Ginny smiled. 'That's brilliant. Now we know how they communicate so quickly. How Dumbledore keeps tabs on everyone."

"Wait!" said Ron suddenly. "Do you suppose there are portraits like this in our common rooms?"

While they pondered this, the portrait returned and smugly said: "Skiving Snackboxes."

"You're kidding!" said Ginny. "Fred and George will love this."

They headed back to the gargoyles. Harry was slowing considerably but tried to keep up the pace. He was panting slightly by the time they gathered around the gargoyle and Hermione firmly stated
"Skiving Snackboxes."

The gargoyle sprang to the side and the friends rode the spiral staircase to the Headmaster's office.

The door opened before they got to the top and Albus Dumbledore met them at the doorway. He looked uncharacteristically worried.

"There is a problem?" he asked, his eyes sliding over the other students and coming to rest on Harry. Harry nodded. He was still trying to catch his breath.

"Come in and sit, sit down," said the headmaster, standing aside and pointing to the chairs in front of his desk. As they settled down he took his seat behind his desk and glanced up at the wall.

"And thank you, Professor Dippet," he said. "Quite resourceful of my students, wasn't it?" he finished with a small smile.

"It was Harry's idea," said Hermione. "And brilliant! I can't believe that all this time I never thought…"

"And a good thing to not spread around too much," said Dumbledore, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Oh, of course. Of course not," said Hermione, turning pink.

"Now, tell me, what is the problem?" He looked deliberately at Harry. Harry had settled back into his chair, and was clutching his arm tightly against his body. He had started to shake a bit. He hadn't realized what emotions this office would stir in him. The memories of the last time he was here, when he had practically torn the office apart in his anger. Less than an hour after Sirius had died….

"Harry? Are you all right?" Dumbledore stood up and waved his wand. A tea tray appeared on his desk and he quickly poured and nodded to Hermione, who pressed a cup into Harry's hands.

Harry gratefully took a drink of tea. "I'm fine. Well, the arm still hurts, and my legs are a bit sore, but it's all fine. That's not the problem anyway. I wanted to talk to you about what happened before my accident. Right before it."

Dumbledore folded his hands and leaned back in his chair.

"Go on, Harry."

"Well, first I…I mean we have some questions."

Dumbledore nodded. "Continue."

"Well," began Harry, "how did my guard work? At Privet Drive, I mean?"

Amazingly, Professor Dumbledore answered without questioning his reason for wanting to know. "The Order maintained a twenty-four hour guard at number four Privet Drive. We broke the watch into six-hour shifts. There was an active guard member there at all times with a designated back-up who could Apparate in at a moment's notice."

"So—Bill was on guard when I had my accident then? And Remus was the back-up?"

"That is correct," said the headmaster.

"Where did the guard hide?" asked Harry.
"It depended on the preferences of the person on watch," said Dumbledore. "I believe Bill was disillusioned behind the shrubbery. We have an invisibility cloak or two that we share, and some of the Order members prefer to patrol the perimeter of the yard wearing one. And, of course, there are other ways of making oneself unseen."

"So, how did Bill get Remus so fast?"

Dumbledore glanced over at Fawkes, his phoenix, who was on his perch and eying the teens with tilted head.

"We have a warning system," he said simply.

Harry glanced over at Fawkes, remembering the night that Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad had broken up the DA meeting last year.

"Professor, right before my scar started hurting, I heard something...."

The headmaster leaned in and gazed at Harry.

"Go on, Harry," he said softly.

"It was a crack," explained Harry. "Like someone Apparating. It happened after the cat jumped and scared me, but right before my scar started to hurt."

Dumbledore gazed at Harry a moment, then leaned back in his chair.

"Professor, if Bill was behind the shrubbery, then whatever—or whoever this was...."

"Would have been right in Bill's sight," finished Ron.

The teens exchanged significant glances then looked up at Dumbledore expectantly. He sighed, then smiled as he looked back at Harry.

"You are correct, Harry," he said very calmly. "The sound you heard was the sound of someone Apparating. We do not yet know who it was, however. According to Bill, a robed figure Apparated onto the yard behind you. The cat jumping was coincidental, we believe, but may have saved your life as it startled whoever this was. According to Bill, he took a step or two backward and at that very moment you grabbed your head and fell into the street."

"What happened to him?" asked Harry. This was unbelievable. Another whole scene had been taking place behind his back and he hadn't had the least idea—but obviously the Order already knew.

"He ran," said Dumbledore. "Down the street. Bill didn't try to follow him—he had something else to take care of."

"Me," said Harry quite softly.

"He had his priorities straight," said Dumbledore looking at Harry and then at his friends.

"But, Professor," said Hermione. She had been uncharacteristically quiet all this time.

Professor Dumbledore inclined his head at her. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"This person who Apparated behind Harry—it wasn't someone from the Order, then?"
Dumbledore shook his head. "There would be no cause for someone from the Order to run."

Hermione glanced over at Harry, then back at Dumbledore.

"But it wasn't a Death Eater, was it?"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "No, we do not believe it was. It is also not likely that a Death Eater would have taken off running."

Harry's mouth had dropped open. Ginny and Ron were staring at Hermione. It was Harry who spoke next.

"It was someone from the Ministry, then, wasn't it?"

Dumbledore met Harry's eyes. Harry saw a sadness in them that he had seen before, but behind that sadness was a determination that was somehow encouraging.

"The Ministry is divided," answered the headmaster. "After the attack and battle at the Ministry in June, Cornelius Fudge has indeed acknowledged Voldemort's return."

He paused and Hermione gave a satisfied nod.

"However, Fudge is and always has been weak. He will soon be gone—any day now. We are confident that the new Minister will be chosen from the ranks of those who oppose Voldemort. But there is a smaller group that continues to support Fudge and that believes that I am the true enemy."

He stopped talking and looked intently at the friends, tapping his index fingers together.

"And with you, me," guessed Harry.

Dumbledore nodded.

"And those who support you," added Ginny very quietly. "Like Dumbledore's Army. And Umbridge had the list…"

Again, Dumbledore nodded.

"It was Percy, wasn't it?" asked Ron suddenly. His hands were balled into fists and his face was pale.

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and he looked at Ron intently then answered in a voice that didn't quite hide the emotion within.

"It may have been, Mr. Weasley. In fact, Bill seems quite convinced that the wizard that Apparated behind Harry was indeed your brother Percy."

"But…but…my scar," said Harry. Percy was a git and didn't like him for sure, but how far would he go? Could he be a Death Eater?

Dumbledore shifted his measured gaze from Ron to Harry.

"The explanation we would all like to believe is that the Apparation of this person had nothing to do with your scar hurting. However, it is certainly more likely that the two were indeed related. Voldemort was feeling strong emotion…"

"Maybe he was feeling strong emotion because someone had been sent by the Ministry to get me," said Harry. A wave of anger was rising inside him and he was trying, quite unsuccessfully, to squash
"That is indeed likely," agreed Dumbledore. "But perhaps the person wasn't exactly sent. He may have been forced…"

"Could Percy have been under the Imperius curse?" asked Hermione.

Professor Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, our belief is that Percy, or whoever this was if not him, was sent to Privet Drive with orders to kidnap Harry. He would not have been able to Apparate out with an underage wizard without detection, so leaving on foot to a more secure meeting place would be a viable plan. The Imperius curse leaves its victims confused, fighting an inner battle. Flight on foot is more likely as the muddled mind is so utterly focused on the imposed task that logic is often lost when the task is interrupted. A wizard forgetting to Apparate and relying on more base physical actions such as running is a feasible scenario."

"Wait a minute," said Harry, going back to something the headmaster had just said. His mind worked furiously and he looked up at Dumbledore with a puzzled expression. "You just said he wouldn't have been able to Apparate with an underage prisoner. Is that really why…why….

"Why Professor Snape Portkeyed with you here instead of Apparating?," finished Dumbledore.

Harry nodded dumbly.

"Partially. Frankly, we were concerned that you could be traced if you used your own magic to travel and yes, even side-along Apparition can require some of your own. With the state of things at the Ministry, it would not be inconceivable that you would again be prosecuted for underage use of magic. Furthermore, Apparition exerts a great deal of pressure on the body. Even though it is generally not life-threatening, you had extensive injuries which would certainly have worsened had you Apparated and that may have become critical."

"But carrying someone while you Portkey is dangerous," said Hermione. "It's rarely done, isn't it?" She looked up at Dumbledore for confirmation.

"You are correct, Miss Granger. Portkeying while holding on to an injured or incapacitated person is very rare indeed. It is not without risk either—great risk—to both parties. It is done only in cases of extreme emergency by the most gifted—and brave—wizards and witches. In this case, it was the only viable option. While Portkeys can be traced, those who use them cannot as the magic comes from the spell used to create the Portkey, not from those using it."

"Have you done it?" asked Harry. "Carried someone by Portkey?"

Dumbledore fixed his gaze on him. His blue eyes locked with the boy's green ones.

"I have. One time." He still remembered the weight of the barely conscious body in his arms, how he had picked the bleeding body up without thought of danger and only when it was over had he realized what a risk he had taken.

"Then why didn't…"

"I will discuss that with you at a different time, Harry," said the headmaster, softly but firmly. Harry knew the conversation was over, but he locked gazes with Dumbledore for a moment more, searching for something—anything. Dumbledore allowed the contact, returning the stare for a moment before he stood up and continued. "Harry, please have Madam Pomfrey look at that arm again after lunch and give you something for the pain."
"Yes sir," answered Harry, breaking eye contact reluctantly.

They all stood and made their way to the office door, silently riding the spiral staircase down to the gargoyle. Everyone was very quiet until they were out of sight of the statue and around a corner. That's when Ron punched the wall.

"Git!" he yelled, punching it again. "Traitor! Conniving little…"

"Stop!" said Ginny, grabbing Ron's hand. Harry moved in front of him to try to calm him down but Ron was still going at it and managed to punch him in the side.

"Oooof!" said Harry, dropping to his knees. Hermione pulled Ron off and put her arms around him, enveloping him in a tight comforting hug while Ginny dropped down next to Harry.

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed. "Are you hurt? I'm sure he didn't mean…"

"I'm fine," he wheezed. "Help me up…I know he didn't mean to punch me." He held out his good hand and she pulled him to his feet, tucking an arm around his waist to give him a bit of support.

"Sorry mate," said Ron, looking over Hermione's shoulder. She was still hugging him fiercely. "I didn't mean…I mean that GIT! If I EVER see him again…"

"Ron!" threatened Hermione as Ron's fists began flailing again.

"You two go on ahead," said Ginny, pulling Harry back to stand against the wall. "We'll meet you there in a few minutes. And Ron, CALM DOWN! He was under the Imperius Curse, for Merlin's sake!"

Ron sheepishly let Hermione lead him away while Ginny and Harry leaned quietly against the wall.

"He's your brother too," said Harry at last. "You should be worried…"

Ginny looked down at the floor. "I am worried," she said. "But Percy's in adult, and Imperius or not, he's chosen his path." She looked sideways at Harry and caught his eye. "You, on the other hand, don't seem to get a choice." She sighed.

Harry stared at her. She was right. He had no choice. Not really. The prophecy would dictate his life until it was fulfilled.

He took a deep breath. His arm hurt, and now his side hurt as well. He felt Ginny's arm tighten around him and he gratefully leaned into her as they walked together toward the Great Hall for lunch.

Chapter 9

A/N: Thanks for all the nice reviews. This is the last "Snapeless" chapter for a while-thanks for your patience with the story 'til this point.

THE PROPHECY

"But Master, he must be at Hogwarts. The Prophet all but stated it. We cannot touch him there."
The all-too-familiar red-eyed figure of Lord Voldemort stood, towering above the silver-handed man who cowered at his feet.

"How did they let him slip away again? He was within our grasp! The plan was perfect—the Ministry would have been blamed. This will not go unpunished!"

"No! Master…please!"

"CRUCIO!" Wormtail writhed and screamed as the curse hit him once, twice, three times.

"You will find a way to infiltrate Hogwarts, my little rat. You will take Potter as well as the fraud seer. Hogwarts will no longer be Dumbledore's safe haven!"

Pain, killing pain, pierced his head as Harry woke to screaming. The pain pressed his head against the pillows and he writhed, twisting his body on top of his bad arm and retching over the side of the bed as wave after wave of crushing pain hit him.

"No!" he moaned. "Not Hogwarts!"

"Harry! Harry, wake up!" The voice above him barely entered his consciousness as the young wizard continued to writhe and moan.

"Ron! What is it?" Ginny and Hermione had run into the room.

"Hermione! Get someone!" yelled Ginny as she ran over to help Ron try to wake Harry.

Hermione ran from the room to find Madam Pomfrey while Ron grabbed Harry. Harry jerked in pain as Ron touched his injured arm. The fresh wash of pain finally pulled him into consciousness. He opened his eyes to stare into Ginny's face.

"Harry," she breathed softly. "It's just us…it's just us…"

"No! Wormtail…Voldemort's…angry." He was breathing very heavily, panting. He had pulled his arm to his chest and was cradling it. The bandages were slowly turning red.

"Harry, mate, we'll get Dumbledore. Hold tight…." He turned to Ginny. "Stay with him, Gin. I'll be right back!" He ran from the room, nearly bowling over Hermione and Madam Pomfrey.

"I've called for the Headmaster, Mr. Weasley," said Madam Pomfrey.

Ron skidded to a halt and hurried back in the room. Ginny had crawled up on the bed and was cradling Harry in her arms. He was clutching her desperately, shaking, and she was rubbing his back and holding him tight. His bandaged, bleeding arm was pressed against her back.

Madam Pomfrey hurried over but did not force the two apart. Harry's sobs were gradually subsiding. He had opened his eyes to see Ron, Hermione and Madam Pomfrey watching him just as Professor Dumbledore hurried in the room.

"Ms. Weasley, it will be best to let Madam Pomfrey examine Mr. Potter now," the Headmaster said softly, walking over to the bed and offering Ginny his hand. Madam Pomfrey had already Scourgified the mess, and Ginny took the headmaster's hand and climbed down off the bed, keeping her eyes on Harry who had collapsed back onto the pillows. He and Ron had come back after lunch for a quick nap. The last thing he remembered before the dream was listening to Ron's comforting snores from the other bed. Now his arm hurt horribly and his scar burned and his head was splitting. As Madam Pomfrey bent down over him, he closed his eyes but the vision he had just witnessed
immediately came back.

"No," he muttered. "Not here…"

Dumbledore took a step forward but Madam Pomfrey waved him back.

"All in good time, Headmaster," she said. "Can you bring him back to the Hospital Wing or should I bring my supplies here?"

"Bring them here, Poppy," answered Dumbledore. He stood beside the bed as she left the room, gazing down at Harry with troubled eyes.

"What did you see, Harry?" he said. His voice was calm, but there was an urgency in it that Harry did not miss.

"He—I mean Voldemort—was punishing Wormtail. For not getting me earlier. He…Voldemort…said Wormtail was to come get me here…and Trelawney too! He said that the Prophet all but said I was here…that Hogwarts wouldn't protect me anymore…"

The headmaster reached down a long-fingered hand and laid it on Harry’s head, touching his scar with his fingers before resting his hand completely on Harry’s forehead. Harry felt a strange sensation and the residual pain slowly ebbed.

"Harry, you are safer here at Hogwarts than anywhere else," he said as Ron, Hermione and Ginny crowded closer in.

"Wait a minute," said Hermione. She spoke very slowly. "Why would he…I mean Voldemort…why would he want Professor Trelawney?"

Dumbledore and Harry locked eyes, then, after an impossibly long time, Dumbledore nodded his head slightly.

"The prophecy," whispered Harry. "He wants to hear the prophecy."

"What does that old fraud have to do with the prophecy?" exclaimed Hermione, slapping her hand over her mouth when she realized she had called Professor Trelawney a fraud in front of the Headmaster.

Dumbledore, however, did not react. His gaze was fixed on Harry.

"Sybil Trelawney is the one who made it, Miss Granger," he said softly. "And even though almost everything else that comes out of her mouth is rubbish, we believe this particular prophecy to be real."

"But it was destroyed at the Ministry, Harry," said Ginny. "Neville dropped it. He said no one could hear it."

"No," said Harry, barely audibly. "I mean, yes, it was destroyed. But that sphere was just the record of it. The person who first heard it remembers it."

"Who?" asked Ron quickly.

"Me," answered Professor Dumbledore. "Did you ever wonder at all why I've kept an "old fraud" here at Hogwarts for seventeen years?"

"Will you show them? Please?" asked Harry, his voice scratchy. He’d cried too much, hurt too much,
held this in far too long. Once again, he looked up at the headmaster, his eyes pleading, and the old wizard spoke.

"I will retrieve my Pensieve from my office, Harry, and bring it here." He turned without another word and left the room.

Madam Pomfrey returned a few moments later. She spread a thick orange paste on the re-opened wound and wrapped it again, then immobilized the arm in its sling for further protection. She handed Harry a pain potion and instructed him to visit her again at bedtime.

They waited quietly for Dumbledore to return. The silence would have been awkward, except that Ginny sat down beside Harry and without a word took him in her arms, hugging him as Mrs. Weasley would have done had she been there. Hermione and Ron dropped down onto a small sofa and Hermione leaned her head into Ron's shoulder and closed her eyes.

Harry decided that he could hug Ginny Weasley forever. She was absolutely perfect. She wasn't asking him questions or worrying about his fate or pitying him in any way. Her hands rubbed comforting circles on his back, and when Dumbledore entered the room a few moments later, she let him go and settled back next to him on the bed as the headmaster placed a heavy stone bowl on a table beside Ron and Hermione.

They looked on curiously as Dumbledore raised his wand to his temple and extracted a long, gossamer strand which he dropped into the basin. He stirred it with his wand and stepped back as a ghostly figure arose from the shimmering pool of thoughts and repeated the words Harry still remembered verbatim.

_The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born as the seventh month dies, born to those who have thrice defied him. And he will have a power the Dark Lord knows not, and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal. And neither shall live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…_

They continued staring at the Pensieve even as the figure of Sybil Trelawney disappeared and the room was quiet once again. Harry looked over at Ron and Hermione.

"So, what do you make of it?" he asked, his voice touched with sarcasm.

"I suppose you are sure it's referring to Harry," Hermione said, addressing the Headmaster.

Dumbledore nodded. "There was another candidate—another boy born the same time as Harry to parents also in the Order of the Phoenix. However, Voldemort himself marked Harry as his equal, as the prophecy states."

"How long have you known, Harry?" asked Hermione. Her voice was very soft, and quivered slightly. Don't cry, thought Harry. Please don't cry.

"Nearly two months," he answered. "When I got back here after Sirius…." He didn't complete the thought. His voice trailed off into silence and he looked down and studied his arm.

"He just told you two months ago!" Ron's unexpected outburst was directed at Professor Dumbledore. "He's known all your life that you're fated to go up against Vol…Voldemort and he just now bothered to tell you!" He turned from Harry to the Headmaster, who was standing very straight and still in the same position he'd taken up when he stepped back from the Pensieve. "Didn't you trust him? Didn't you trust us? Don't you think he's wondered his whole life?" He stood up suddenly. This was not the Ron he knew. This was a different Ron. An _older_ Ron.
Dumbledore did not move.

"I have already apologized to Harry and explained both my mistakes and my weaknesses. I was wrong to have withheld this information for so long. I simply could not force myself to tell him, what with all that he had to endure." He smiled very sadly but did not make a move to leave the room.

"It's alright, Ron," said Harry. Ron's outburst meant a great deal to him. Ron understood. If no one else did, Ron did. He allowed the smallest spark of happiness to light his heart.

"No, it's not alright, Harry," seethed Ron. He stood up and faced his friend. "It's not fair! It's never been fair!" He whirled around to face the Headmaster again. "First he loses his parents, then almost gets killed by bloody Voldemort, then he has to live his whole life with those…those…" he almost spat out the word "Dursleys! And when he finally finds some family, HE gets taken away too! It's not alright and it's not fair!" Ron pounded his fist into the wall then kicked the door frame, turning back to face the Headmaster, who was standing very still and gazing steadily at him. "And now . . . .now you tell him that he has to kill Voldemort or die trying! Well he's not going to do it alone. Maybe that's the bloody power that old fraud was talking about—having friends who care about him!" He pummeled the wall again with his fist, then leaned his head against the wall and let out a sound that was half sob, half strangled moan. Harry looked from Ron to Hermione, who looked both horrified and angry, to Ginny who was looking at Ron as if he was an escaped gorilla from the London Zoo, to Professor Dumbledore who had a look in his eye that Harry could not quite determine but that looked surprisingly like….triumph.

"It's not his fault, Ron," said Harry. Somehow, sometime over the past weeks, he'd reconciled his anger and was fast moving toward acceptance. "He didn't make the prophecy and he's only tried to keep me alive all these years. He's done everything he could. I've already destroyed his office—let's not destroy the rest of the castle too."

Professor Dumbledore rested his hands on the Pensieve. As he picked up the heavy bowl, Harry for the first time noticed the glove he wore over one hand.

"I am calling a special meeting of the Order tonight," he said. "We will be meeting at Order Headquarters and will be discussing Harry's vision and how to protect both him and Hogwarts. I have arranged dinner for you in the faculty lounge at six o'clock." Without another word, he turned and left the room.

Harry watched the door close and then said to his friends. "Why is Dumbledore wearing one glove?"

Chapter 10

THE PLAN

They spent the afternoon talking. Talked until there was nothing left to say about the prophecy. Nothing left to say about what had happened at the Department of Mysteries. Nothing left to say about why Dumbledore had kept the information from Harry for so long. They talked about the single glove—and Harry had laughed at Hermione's suggestion that he was channeling Michael Jackson while Ron and Ginny said "Michael who?"

They didn't hear again from Dumbledore until the next morning. Ginny and Ron had borrowed school brooms and were flying on the pitch, playing with a quaffle, while Hermione and Harry
Harry itched to get on a broom—his "lifetime" ban from Quidditch imposed by Umbridge had been lifted, but Madam Pomfrey had imposed a new "medical" ban for the rest of the summer. Neither he nor Hermione noticed the headmaster until he was nearly beside them. Dressed in deep purple robes with small half-moons matching his glasses, and wearing the single white glove, the old man settled down on a bench beside them. Without pleasantries or preamble he spoke.

"After consideration of the episode on Privet Drive and Harry's vision yesterday, we have decided to further fortify and protect the school and its grounds from attack and infiltration. This effort will require the concentration and cooperation of a large number of talented wizards and witches, and cannot escape the scrutiny of the Ministry. For that reason, the Weasleys and Ms. Granger will be going on a short holiday with the Grangers and you, Harry, will be traveling to a secure location with Professor Snape to learn Occlumency." He held up a hand—the white gloved hand—as both Harry and Hermione began to protest.

"Please, let me finish." He looked directly at Harry, deliberately encouraging the eye contact he had avoided all the previous year. Harry knew he didn't need Legilimency to read his emotions. Anger, resignation, confusion, disappointment, even fear—they were all there, all just under the surface. The young man almost shook as he broke eye contact and covered his face with his hands, seeking control.

"All right then…go on," said Harry. "Tell me exactly why me going off with Professor Snape is a good idea." He stressed the potion master's title deliberately.

"You cannot stay here, Harry," said the headmaster, after a pause. "We have every reason to believe someone from within the Ministry means you harm, and the fortification of the wards will be done under Ministry supervision. It would be all too easy for this person to get into Hogwarts while we strengthen the wards and even to sabotage the process. We must be vigilant—and you must not be here."

Harry nodded in reluctant acknowledgement of the truth of the statement. His face was still covered by his hands, and he rubbed distractedly at his scar.

"As for why Professor Snape…. I must remain here and he is the only other that I trust to teach you to occlude your mind." Harry raised his head, about to point out that their previous Occlumency lessons had not exactly prevented Voldemort from possessing him at the Ministry. But Dumbledore once more silenced him, this time with a pointed look.

"I am fully aware of the…animosity…between you and Severus." Harry and Hermione exchanged a quick look at the Headmaster's use of Snape's first name. "However, matters are even more pressing now than they were a year ago. Severus—Professor Snape—has agreed to this as well. Like myself, he believes that you are more ready for this than you were a year ago."

Harry had raised his head and sat quietly for a moment, watching Ginny take shots while Ron guarded the goal. He rubbed his scar again. He felt Hermione's hand slip into his and squeeze it.

"I wish we could go with you," she said earnestly.

Harry squeezed her hand back, taking strength from his friend's support. Squaring his shoulders resolutely, he met Dumbledore's eye.

"So I'm to go off with Professor Snape," he started, not quite keeping the resentment he felt out of his voice. "Where are we going, then?"
"I have a cottage on the coast," answered Dumbledore. "It is quite protected—both magically and physically." He smiled at Harry almost whimsically. "I was there myself a few months ago when I had to leave Hogwarts rather suddenly…." He stood up, straightening his hat which had become a bit off kilter in the wind. "It is only for three weeks, Harry, but you are to leave tomorrow morning. Professor Snape is meeting with Madam Pomfrey now to review your potions and your physical therapy."

"My what?" No one had said anything about therapy.

"Physical therapy, Harry," answered Hermione. "You'll likely have a series of exercises to help you get full mobility and functionality back in your legs and arm. I had a full round of it the year before I came to Hogwarts after I broke my leg skiing."

Harry looked from Hermione to Dumbledore.

"Hermione is correct. You will need to regain strength. The potions and other magical treatments can only repair the damage, not restore full functionality. The physical therapy may actually make the Occlumency lessons more successful as you will be working with Professor Snape in both the physical and the mental realms."

Harry sighed. Not only would he be mentally assaulted by the potions master, but Snape would be responsible for his physical torture as well. He didn't need Hermione's explanation of physical therapy. He had seen Dudley go through it when they were only seven. Dudley had broken his leg when the chair he was standing on while trying to get the biscuit jar off the top of the fridge collapsed. He had moaned and cried every time the P.T. appointment rolled around and Aunt Petunia had had to coerce him out of the house with promises of ice cream. He particularly remembered the in-home therapy, with Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon manually moving Dudley's leg. He shuddered. Professor Dumbledore looked at him curiously for a moment.

"Does Snape want to do this?" asked Harry. It would be bad enough being there with Snape under any circumstances, but if he was being forced into this….The answer was quite obvious from Dumbledore's reaction.

"Professor Snape values his privacy, Harry. To be honest, this would not be how he would choose to spend the end of his summer holiday. But it is necessary, and I have asked him to take on this responsibility, and he has agreed."

Harry swallowed another protest and smiled wanly.

"Alright, then," he said quietly. "It's only three weeks. It can't be worse than spending the time at the Dursleys, anyway."

Dumbledore's face tightened slightly at Harry's comment but he didn't immediately reply.

"I have asked Professor Snape to enter this arrangement without his existing prejudices and he has agreed to try. But Harry, you must do the same. And you must know that there is the chance he will be called by Voldemort while he is with you. Should that unfortunate event occur, he will leave instructions for you."

Harry could not help it. He had the opportunity. He had to ask…. 

"Professor – why do you trust him?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry, sitting there before him. Harry wondered what he saw – bandaged and bound right arm, lightning bolt scar resting above green eyes. Did he see Lily Potter in those
"Because I know what he fights for," Dumbledore said at last. He fingered the glove covering his own hand. "I trust him with my life, Harry, and with yours. If that is not enough, then you yourself do not trust me."

He stood as if to leave. "I have moved your school trunk and other possessions from the Dursleys into the visitor rooms. Hedwig is in the owlery and we will be happy to keep her here while you are away. Finally, Professor Snape and Madam Pomfrey require your presence in the hospital wing after dinner tonight. And now I will take my leave. I have preparations to make before the first Unspeakables arrive tomorrow afternoon. Good day, Mr. Potter. Miss Granger."

"Sir! Professor Dumbledore!" Harry stood up as the headmaster moved away down the stands. The man stopped and turned, looking at Harry expectantly over his half-moon spectacles.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Your hand." The two words lay between them like an elephant in the parlor. "What happened to your hand? Why are you wearing a glove over it?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtfully at the glove a long moment then pulled it from the bottom to fit more snugly over his fingers.

"That, my boy, is a story for another day."

SHELL COTTAGE

Ron and Ginny had been outraged on Harry's behalf, even protesting after they discovered that the Grangers would be taking them by aeroplane to the States where Hermione's parents would be attending a dentist's convention in Boston and would then take them to visit the American Wizarding Community in Salem. Dumbledore quickly produced passports for Ron and Ginny identifying them as Ronald and Ginevra Granger and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley brought over extra clothing and supplies. By dinnertime, they were packed and ready to go.

"I really hate leaving you, Harry," said Ron, swallowing a mouthful of chicken pie. "You sure you're going to be alright with the greasy git?"

"Ronald!" exclaimed Hermione. "You aren't helping at all."

Harry quit pretending to eat his mushy peas and put down his fork. They'd spent a good part of the day in their rooms talking and he'd gradually accepted the fact (strongly reinforced by Hermione) that it was important to learn Occlumency and that the three weeks would pass quickly. The trip to Boston intrigued him, but frankly, he didn't really feel up to eight hours on a plane even though it would be very amusing to watch Ron in particular deal with Muggle technology and aeroplane seats that could not be magically expanded to accommodate his lanky frame. He wondered if he would ask the fight attendant for pumpkin juice or butterbeer.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Stop worrying about it."
Ginny gave him a doubtful look but Ron seemed somewhat appeased. They'd just finished pudding when Nymphadora Tonks arrived to escort them to Hogsmeade, where they'd be departing for London to meet the Grangers.

"Nice outfit, Tonks!" exclaimed Ginny. Ron and Harry stood with their mouths open and Hermione looked mildly appalled.

"Going on undercover assignment in a Muggle club after I drop off you lot," explained Tonks, pulling her purple skirt down in an attempt to cover the top of her thigh-high black boots.

Harry walked with them to the entrance hall and out onto the stone stairs. Hermione and Tonks hugged him goodbye, then Ginny held him quite fiercely, and even Ron managed a one-armed hug.

"See you on September first, then," said Harry.

"Right…let's get moving," said Tonks. She winked at Harry and then led her little group out onto the grounds and toward the gates. He watched Hermione try to insert herself between Ron and Tonks, but Ron wasn't giving up his position easily. Harry sighed then abruptly turned and went back into the castle, annoyed with himself for feeling so put out, for letting the injustice get to him all over again. He had been told to report to the hospital wing after dinner, so began making his way there.

Harry's legs were steady on level ground now, but stairs were still difficult and his progress was slow. Still, he managed to arrive at the same time as Snape, approaching the hospital wing door from the opposite direction. Snape acknowledged him with a stiff "Mr. Potter" and held open the door with an indifferent air while he limped inside.

Madam Pomfrey led him through a series of exercises for his legs and his arm. Some were strength building and others would gradually improve his manual dexterity. Thankfully, there were none that required Professor Snape to move or manipulate his leg for him. She then reviewed his potion regimen with both of them. Snape could not be accused of being friendly, but neither was he particularly snarky. If Harry had to pick a word to describe his behavior during the session with Madam Pomfrey, he'd have said "professional." He'd also consider "stiff," perhaps, and "uncomfortable." When Madam Pomfrey was satisfied that both Harry and Snape understood what was required for Harry's complete physical recovery (potions, exercise, fresh air and plenty of sleep), she officially discharged him and hurried off to answer a call from Professor Dumbledore.

Snape collected the various potions and unguents she'd given him, placing them in a carrying case that resembled, to Harry's eye, a nineteenth century medical kit. "You may go, Mr. Potter. Meet me in the entrance hall at eight thirty tomorrow morning," Snape said, not looking up as he arranged the vials and bottles and secured the stoppers. Harry nodded and stood, ready to leave. "Bring your summer assignments." Again, Harry nodded. Snape resumed his study of the case's contents and Harry turned toward the door. His legs ached after the exercise and he hoped he'd make it to his room without collapsing. He almost missed Snape's departing comment. "And bring your swimwear. We will be near the ocean."

Twelve hours later, Harry stood next to Professor Snape staring at the ocean from a copse of trees and scrubby hedges several meters above the shoreline. He'd just undergone his first experience of Apparition—side-along Apparition according to the headmaster, who had waved them off moments ago after delightedly transfiguring a pair of Harry's boxers into nearly knee-length swimming trunks. He'd held up the rather sedate blue garment and—Harry was sure of this—had been about to add some sort of garish addition such as rainbow colored broomsticks or golden stars when Snape snatched the trunks from him and stuffed them back in Harry's trunk. Harry was indescribably relieved that he'd packed his boxers on the top of his trunk instead of his smalls. At the gates of Hogwarts, Snape had instructed him to take his arm and to hold on and moments later they had
reappeared right here. The feeling was altogether unpleasant, like being forced through a straw and squeezed by a boa constrictor at the same time. He'd felt breathless when they reappeared, but at least he landed on his feet and wasn't covered with soot. So far, the only magical transportation that didn't nauseate Harry was travel by broomstick. But where were they?

But Snape was not staring out at the ocean like Harry was. He was pulling a piece of parchment out of his cape pocket and unfolding it. He handed it to Harry, who quickly read the words written on it in Albus Dumbledore's fine, spidery handwriting.

"Shell Cottage is found on the western coast of England, number 22 Cairn Way, Cardiff."

Instantly, the clearing disappeared and a cottage popped in in its place. While Number Twelve Grimmauld Place had seemed to squeeze its way out between Numbers Eleven and Thirteen, this cottage seemed to swell out from the ground like a giant mushroom, displacing the hedges and scooting them over to the sides. It was small and tidy, tightly constructed against the coastal winds and rains, and surrounded by sheltering trees. One side of the house was attached to a magnificent porch which overlooked the ocean. Harry involuntarily took a step forward, drawn in as if by the house itself.

A low chuckle startled him.

"It has that affect on people, doesn’t it?" Snape muttered. "Damn welcoming cottage—like a warm fire on a cold night." He shook out his traveling robe and walked purposefully toward the garden gate. He stopped to open it, then turned back toward Harry and fixed him with a stare that, while not unfriendly, was certainly not as welcoming as the cottage was. "Come on, then." Harry took one last look around then followed his professor. At the door, Snape produced a set of keys on a simple silver ring. The keys were of various shapes and sizes and Snape quickly sorted through them and inserted one in what looked to be an ordinary lock precisely in the center of the door. After turning it, he removed the key and sorted through them again, this time selecting a different key, inserting it, and giving it a full turn. This process continued through at least five more keys before he whispered "Alohomora" and the door swung open. Harry could not help but wonder if the keys were an elaborate ruse and the door could be opened with the simple unlocking spell.

Once inside, Snape removed his cloak and hung it on a hook in the entry. Harry did the same with his jacket, then looked around at the cottage interior. The entryway opened into a large sitting room with an elaborate fireplace embedded with shells. An open door from the sitting room led to a spacious kitchen. Stairs led up from the other side of the foyer. While the outside was decidedly welcoming, the inside could only be described as cozy—lots of worn and comfortable furnishings, decorations with a marked seascape influence. Snape directed Harry onto the sitting room sofa with a hand gesture and chose a seat for himself on a plush blue chair directly across from him. He stared at Harry for a few moments. The experience was beginning to unsettle Harry—Snape was being decidedly unSnapelike. He wasn't sneering, nor was he smiling. He didn't call Harry "Potter" but he didn't call him "Harry" either. In fact, it seemed that he'd somehow managed to turn off all emotions, handling Harry in an almost clinical fashion, a feat that—like the previous night in the infirmary—did little to put Harry at ease.

When Snape spoke, Harry jumped a bit. Snape's voice was quiet yet each word was sharply enunciated.

"I am here today with you because the Headmaster made a request of me. I am honoring that request as well as a commitment I made fifteen years ago—to your mother."

"My mother? What does my mother…?" Harry tried, he really did. He knew interrupting would not get him anywhere with Snape, but when it came to his mother…his mother…
The words had died on his lips when he became the recipient of a very Snape-ish glare.

"Do not interrupt me again." Harry thought Snape must be trying particularly hard not to hex him. He glanced at Snape’s wand hand and was sure he saw it twitch a bit.

"Your mother…." Here Snape paused and turned his head to look out the window into the front garden. After a moment's reflection he turned back to face Harry, continuing in the same quiet voice, a little less sharp than before. "Your mother was my…friend." Talking about Lily seemed to be painful for him, Harry noted, and he wisely kept his mouth shut. He would do almost anything to hear about his mother, even from Snape, even when the words coming out of his mouth made almost no sense to Harry. How could they have been friends? *You were in Slytherin!*

But Snape was staring at him with narrowed eyes. "You are an open book, Mr. Potter. Yes, we were in different houses. Yes, I was in Slytherin and she in Gryffindor. But we met as children—we grew up in the same neighborhood." Harry knew his face again betrayed his surprise, the shock at learning his mum and Snape were childhood friends. "And that is all you will hear about that for the moment. Suffice it to say that I made a promise and I intend to keep it. I did not think that I would have to act so…so…*overtly* to do so."

Harry watched Snape as he stood and walked over to the low bookshelves that lined a wall of the room. He scanned the shelf only briefly before pulling out a very old leather-bound tome. He blew the dust from the top of the book and handed it to Harry.

"Choose either of the smaller bedrooms upstairs—they both overlook the ocean. I'll bring up your trunk and enlarge it and you will have an hour to unpack and explore the house and grounds. Stay off the shoreline for the time being—it is rocky and the sea here a bit unpredictable. At ten o'clock you will meet me on the porch. I trust you will find it in your explorations. Bring the book."

Harry nodded, but his attention was directed to the book in his hands. The title was benign enough—*Mind Magic*. No, what caught his eye was the author…Gellert Grindelwald. He didn't know what to ask first—why he was given a book by a former Dark Lord or how Snape knew it was there to begin with. He swallowed.

"Sir? You've been here before?"

Snape's bright black eyes bored into him. "You are given a book authored by Gellert Grindelwald and your first question is whether I've been to this cottage before?"

"I thought I might only get the one question, sir," answered Harry.

Snape stared at him a moment longer. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. I've been here before. You are holding my book, in fact, the book the headmaster gave me when he brought me here to learn Occlumency shortly after…." He hesitated, looking at Harry's forehead. "Shortly after you received that scar."

Chapter 12

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THE SCAR

Unpacking took only minutes. Harry left most of his belongings in his trunk, removing only his
clothing and toiletries. He looked longingly at his Firebolt. Snape would likely have a conniption fit if he knew Harry had brought it along, so he tucked it into the back of the cupboard in the bedroom he had chosen. He explored the upstairs first, peaking into a modest bath but avoiding the closed door of the bedroom that looked out over the garden. Snape had disappeared into that room after enlarging Harry's trunk and warning him—again—to stay away from the rocky shore. He had looked critically at Harry's legs while issuing the warning—though perhaps he was actually studying his worn and too large trainers with their knotted laces.

Downstairs, Harry discovered a small loo, a sunny kitchen and best yet, the glorious porch with windows on three sides. Ahead of him was the ocean. Harry Potter was sixteen years old and had grown up within an hour or two's drive of the ocean yet this was the first time he'd really seen it. (You couldn't really count the turbulent sea surrounding that island the Dursleys had taken him to when trying to avoid the Hogwarts owls.) The day was unusually clear, but what drew Harry wasn't the sight of the ocean but the sound of it. It echoed in his head, calming him, and though he didn't know it, beginning to drown out some of the residual noise that had settled there over the past two very stressful years.

The porch was filled with comfortable lounges and chairs and a wicker table for tea. A door led off the porch to the yard below, but the stairs were steep and the railing low, so Harry wisely chose to go out the front door and explore the garden. He could just imagine slipping or falling on those stairs and having to wait for Snape to come help him. He would much rather live to see seventeen, thank you very much.

The front garden was contained inside a short white picket fence. Perennials bloomed everywhere in riotous color. Unlike the sterile rows of Aunt Petunia's garden, this garden seemed to create its own wild order. Beds of brown-eyed Susans pushed into Shasta daisies and day lilies and a bed of oregano overflowed the brick border into a wide path. Far beyond the fence, fifty meters or so away, was a gravel road, though there was no connecting drive leading up to the cottage itself. Harry considered exploring outside the fence but his legs were aching already and he wasn't sure how far the protection of the Fidelius charm extended. Sighing, he went back into the house and explored the sitting room. The fireplace was the dominant feature. It was built into a corner of the room and featured a semi-circular opening surrounded by shells embedded in the mortar. The mantle was a wide slab of granite, adorned with driftwood and a box of Floo powder. He gave the bookshelves a passing glance then returned to the porch and settled on a lounge. In the twenty-four hours since Dumbledore had informed him he'd be going away with Snape, he'd tried very hard to simply go about it without thinking. Gone was the uncontrollable anger of last year, the feeling that an unfair world was set to ultimately destroy him. He'd burned out the anger with Sirius' death and with the enormity of the prophecy. Funny how the prophecy put everything else into perspective.

He must have dozed off because the next thing he knew, a firm hand was on his shoulder, shaking him awake. He opened his eyes and sat up quickly. Snape had joined him on the porch and was laying out supplies on the tea table next to Harry's lounge chair. Harry recognized the topical potion that had made his skin smoke the day before as well as a muscle relaxant and a pain potion. A fourth jar, squat with a screw-off lid, was new. While Harry watched, the potions master removed a pair of scissors and a roll of gauze from the medical kit he had packed in the infirmary.

"Sit over here, please," instructed Snape, indicating one of the three remaining chairs around the table. No snarky comments about being a "lie about" or disparaging remarks about his parentage. Harry was puzzled. He didn't exactly like this new Snape, but found it much harder to hate him outright.

He eased his legs over the side of the lounge and used one of the chairs next to Snape to steady himself as he got to his feet. He sat where Snape indicated and Snape immediately picked up the
scissors and began to cut through the bandage on his arm. Holding Harry's elbow, he rotated his lower arm slightly to each side. Harry winced softly but Snape didn't seem to notice. Instead, he poured on some more of what Harry now referred to as the "smoke" potion then passed Harry the muscle relaxant. Harry downed it without comment, wrinkling his nose a bit at the medicinal, bitter taste.

"Do you feel you need a potion for pain now?" asked Snape. He was reading over Madam Pomfrey's notes. Harry could make out "as needed" as he attempted to read the parchment from his side of the table.

"No, I'm fine now," he stated and Snape put the potion containing the pain suppressant back into the kit. He wrapped up Harry's arm again, quickly and clinically, but did not replace the sling. He then settled back into his chair and looked directly at Harry.

"Mr. Potter, I have been asked by the headmaster to speak to you about the scar on your right hand." He picked up the squat potion jar as Harry clenched said hand, sending pain shooting up to his shoulder, and drew it closer to his body. He had grown accustomed to the faint scarring on the top of his hand from Umbridge's quill, a torturous device that wrote with his own blood, which she'd used on him during his frequent detentions last year. He had not exactly tried to hide it from anyone but he hadn't confided to any adults either.

Snape handed the jar to Harry and Harry took it with his left hand, eying Snape curiously.

"Rub this cream on the scar every evening at bedtime. I…the cream was developed to help minimize scarring. It may be too late to totally erase it but it will certainly fade."

Harry pocketed the jar. "Thank-you," he said quietly. He had a feeling that "speaking about the scar" would involve more than discussing how to get rid of it.

He was right.

"When Madam Pomfrey discovered the scar and informed the Headmaster, he came to the infirmary himself to see it. He then called in your head of house. Professor McGonagall knew nothing about it and suggested that Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger should be questioned. The Headmaster considered that course of action but ultimately decided that it could wait until your other injuries had healed."

The professor was watching his face, Harry realized, and he suddenly understood. They didn't know about the blood quill...they thought he had done this to himself.

"Look—it's not what you think," he said, fingering the jar in his pocket. Snape's cool gaze did not waiver as he spoke, remaining focused on his face, bright but emotionless. "I…I didn't do this myself." Snape's eyebrows raised a fraction.

"It's from detention…with Umbridge," he continued. He didn't understand why he was still so reluctant to talk about it. After all, Umbridge seemed to be well out of the picture after her encounter with the centaurs.

"Detention?" repeated Snape, his voice rising to a question, encouraging Harry to continue. He moved his chair back and angled it so that he was facing Harry. Harry noticed suddenly that the Potions Master was wearing black trousers and a collared white button-down shirt with long sleeves, buttoned at the wrists. He'd removed his robes and looked decidedly less threatening without them.

"It wasn't just me, you know," Harry continued, feeling a bit desperate. "Though I don't think she used it more than once on anyone else." He shrugged. "I guess they learned their lesson faster than I did."
"Mr. Potter, while I appreciate that you recognize your stubbornness, I'm still waiting to hear what precisely gave you that interesting scar." Harry knew it must be costing Snape quite a bit to remain relatively calm and so determinedly neutral. He was surprisingly glad that he had let some of his habitual sarcasm slip into that last statement.

"Lines," supplied Harry at last.

"Lines?" Again, the fractionally raised eyebrow.

Harry sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound. "Look, she had this special quill she made us use for lines. It didn't use ink."

But Snape's face had just morphed into an expression that Harry would have found humorous had they been in Potions class—well, anywhere but here, actually. If he had to describe it he'd have said that Snape looked as if had been unexpectedly punched by his best friend, managing to look both angry and horrified at the same time. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet and almost menacing.

"She made you use a blood quill?" He hissed the last two words as he grabbed Harry's hand and turned it toward the bright light from the ocean facing windows.

"Yeah," said Harry, wincing slightly as his arm was manipulated. "I guess you could call it that. She gave me detentions every night for several weeks—for claiming that Voldemort was alive."

"And you told no one?" hissed Snape, abandoning the reserved, emotionless demeanor he had been maintaining and not even bothering to tell Harry not to use the Dark Lord's name.

"I told my friends!" retorted Harry. Snape's wilting control was affecting Harry's as well. "I couldn't tell anyone else. It wouldn't have done me any good if she thought I was getting special treatment from anyone. She probably would have made me practice knot tying with my intestines next!"

"Mr. Potter, I am not criticizing your choice. I am simply trying to confirm that no one else at Hogwarts—no adults anyway—knew of this particular brand of discipline."

Harry shook his head.

Snape stood, pushed his chair in and walked over to the windows, looking out at the crashing waves for several moments while Harry remained quiet, wondering where this was going. At length, Snape turned back to face him.

"This may surprise you, Mr. Potter, but I do understand why you chose not to talk to someone—perhaps your head of house—about these incidents. It was not only the students who felt terrorized by the toad—yes, Mr. Potter, that nickname was not only used by the students." He smirked at Harry and Harry found his own mouth forming a half-smile. Snape stared at him a moment longer and Harry wondered if he really believed that fear of Umbridge was the reason Harry had kept silent about the blood quill. He looked away then, back out the window, as he continued speaking.

"But this is a serious offense. Blood quills are dark objects. They have been banned for at least a hundred years. How that...woman..." he practically spat out the word, "acquired one is beyond me. It must have come straight from the Ministry vaults." He turned back toward Harry and glanced at an old-fashioned clock on the wall behind him.

"I must contact the Headmaster. He will want to pursue this matter further. Stay here and begin reading your book—first chapter only. You will read only in this room or down at the shore when you are steady enough to navigate the rocks."
Harry nodded his understanding and made his way back to the lounge chair he had been sleeping on when Snape woke him earlier. He had left *Mind Magic* on the small wicker table there.

Snape walked back to the kitchen door and opened it, but stopped and turned before exiting. "After lunch we will begin brewing a more powerful unguent for that scar. The salve I gave you earlier is not strong enough—not nearly."

He closed the door behind him and Harry sank into the comfortable lounge, picked up the book and without opening it, gazed out the windows before him. He was suddenly reminded of his friends—by now on their way across this very ocean to Boston. Ron and Ginny would be gazing out the windows of the aeroplane at the sea below, Hermione reading (she'd be insanely envious of the book Harry was about to open). He turned his right hand over and looked at the scar etched in his skin. *I must not tell lies.* He'd lived with scars all his life, and he'd lived with lies. Personally, he rather preferred the scars.

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Chapter 13

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THE DREAM

He'd meant to read, really he had, but the muted thrum of the waves against the rocky shore was like a low, calming chant and his eyelids began to feel incredibly heavy. He briefly wondered about the potion he had recently swallowed—was it making him groggy?—but had little time to consider as he drifted off to sleep. He didn't wake when Professor Snape re-entered the room, giving him only a passing glance, not at all surprised to find his charge sleeping, as he moved to the windows and quietly cranked open the three in the center. He looked back at Harry as the sea air began to push into the room. The thrum of the waves grew louder as the professor stooped to pick up the Grindelwald book from the floor where it had fallen from Harry's hand. He placed it back on the lounge chair, tucking it in beside the sleeping boy, and left quietly again through the kitchen door.

With the hypnotic sound of the ocean providing a background chorus in his head, Harry dreamed.

_In the dream, he was helping Luna locate her missing belongings during the end of year feast. They found her shoes tied together and slung across the back of a thestral which was quietly eating a dead rat in a 3rd floor corridor._

"You don't have to see what others see, Harry," she told him as she retrieved her shoes. "You just need to see what's really there." She climbed on the back of the thestral and its black, leathery coat turned to silver in a slow wash from withers to flank, until she was sitting on a unicorn rather than a thestral. It paced back and forth three times until a sturdy wooden door appeared, then disappeared through it. The entire wall then shimmered into transparency and was gone. And Harry saw the sea before him, not a rough and rocky and turbulent ocean but a vast expanse of golden sand, warmed by the sun and kissed by gentle waves. He discovered that he was barefoot and the warm sand felt pleasant beneath his feet as he walked tentatively toward the beckoning water. He sat down cross-legged a few meters from where the waves washed in, ebbing water draining back out, and watched seagulls skim the water, lifting small sea creatures in their beaks then dropping the shells on the rocks to crack them open. But as he watched them dip and soar, the seagulls morphed into white owls and the shells into letters. The letters drifted downward slowly, catching air currents, some of them even rising again before spiraling down. One of the letters fell right into his hands as he sat... not on the beach but on the inside ledge of the Astronomy Tower. The letter was addressed to "Harry Potter, #4 Privet Drive, Surrey, The Cupboard Under the Stairs."
"Let me see that," said a rough voice beside him and a thin hand with dirty, broken nails reached out and took the letter from him. Sirius. "You would have had your own room with me," he said as he sat beside Harry, holding the letter. "You would have had friends, and clothes that fit you, and enough to eat and a father's love." Harry reached for the letter then but it turned to ashes as he touched it, and Sirius turned to ashes too and the ashes mixed together and blew away with the wind toward the lake. Harry reached for the ashes, trying to catch them up in his hands, but they blew through his fingers as he grabbed at the air. He opened his right hand and it was empty, but his left hand, mysteriously covered in a white glove, had tiny dark ash spots dotting the palm.

Dream Harry smiled and brought his hands together to cup the tiny bird. The ashes fell through his fingers into the water and were carried out to sea and it was like a burial of sorts, for Harry saw Sirius in the ashes, and the tiny phoenix reborn shed a tiny tear that fell into the water amid some darting minnows. The minnows turned into gossamer strands of memories and a stone basin rose from the water, minnows-turned-memories floating inside it, memory-tails still flicking from side to side. Images formed in the basin, insubstantial and changing like pictures in clouds. A familiar voice said "Harry, are you ready?" and he looked up to see Professor Dumbledore standing opposite him. The Headmaster stretched out the gloved hand to him, and Harry looked down at his own hands. A golden feather was all that remained of the phoenix and he let it fall into the basin as he reached out toward Dumbledore's hand.

But the basin was gone now and the feather drifted down to the water, only it wasn't a feather any longer but a brilliant sword with jeweled handle, resting quietly beneath the water on the sandy ocean floor. Harry gazed at it a moment, suddenly chilled to the bone, then grasped the Headmaster's hand before him.

"Mr. Potter!"

Harry opened his eyes. Professor Snape was standing above him. They locked eyes.

"Legimens."
"Legilimens."

Harry was too surprised—and too disoriented with sleep—to even try to keep Snape out. He could barely brace himself for the punishing attack, but surprisingly it didn't come. Instead, ghost-like hands seemed to graze the surface of his mind and he found strange non-memories playing out with a dream-like quality. Luna astride a thestral, Sirius on the Astronomy Tower, Dumbledore standing in the ocean beside a pensieve. Ashes. A golden feather.

Suddenly the ghost-like feeling was gone. Harry found himself still sitting in the lounge chair, not on the floor on his hands and knees panting from fighting the Legilimency spell. He felt curiously bereft.

"Be still for a moment longer," said Snape's quiet voice. "Close your eyes. Attempt to recall the dream in detail."

Harry closed his eyes, compelled to do so by the hypnotic quality of his professor's voice, his mind complacent and weary. The dream Snape had observed, had stirred up from his slumbering mind, began to play out.

"Look for the connections." Snape's voice was low as he spoke from Harry's level, sitting on the end of the lounge chair beside him. "Recurring themes. These are important. Take time to observe, to recall."

Five minutes later, Harry opened his eyes again and found Snape holding out a small notebook and a Muggle pencil.

"Write them down," he instructed. "Don't think too much—go with what is most obvious."

Harry looked over at him strangely but completed the exercise in silence. It wasn't difficult at all.

"Now," said Snape when Harry stopped writing. "We compare lists. Read off your first item."

Harry noticed then that Snape also had a small notebook and pencil. This lesson—for it had to be part of his training—was so unlike his previous Occlumency experience that he briefly wondered if Remus Lupin had polyjuiced himself into Severus Snape and was in fact sitting before him, looking very Snapelike. Snape's clinical manner persisted but it was so much less grating than his previous constant derision and belittlement that Harry wisely complied.

"Flying," said Harry, reading off the first item on his list. "I think that's the most important—it's the one that stood out the most to me."

"Good. I noted that one as well. Brooms and thestrals and birds." He made a mark in his notebook and appeared to scan the list. "Your Godfather," he said, his voice strangely tight, as if it cost him greatly not to call Sirius "the mutt" or your "Dogfather."

Harry did not look up. He didn't want to see Snape's face or let Snape see his. He made another tick in his notebook. "I've that one too," he stated softly, then paused to consider. "Water."

"I put down 'ocean'," said Snape. "Ashes." Harry closed his eyes against the image of Sirius turning to ash and the ashes blowing through his outstretched fingers. His turn.

"Birds," he said. "Or perhaps wings—the thestral had them as well."

"Related to flying," muttered Snape. "That will be a strong one." He studied his list again.
"Loneliness—or isolation."

"I had ‘peace,’” said Harry, eyeing Snape speculatively. Was what Harry thought of as peace more like loneliness to Snape? "I don't have any more themes," he said. "I think the rest might be symbols—items I've encountered in the past—the stone, the sword, the golden snitch…"

"The pensieve," added Snape, still staring at his list. "The cupboard. All of them symbols, in or out of context." He looked up at Harry. "We will discuss these in detail at another time."

"Are you planning on telling me what we're doing?" asked Harry after a moment of silence, somewhat disturbed that the cupboard under the stairs had come up yet again in an Occlumency lesson. He hoped he didn't sound whiny.

Snape's head jerked up quickly. "In time," he answered sharply. "If your feebl..." He stopped himself, and Harry knew he had been about to slip up and call him feeble-brained or feeble-minded or something of the sort. Snape turned his head to stare at the ocean for a long moment, then turned back to face Harry.

"You have just experienced your first sea dream. It was helped along this time by the potion you drank before falling asleep. I deliberately woke you while you were still dreaming and used Legilimency immediately to anchor the dream images for you. They are—as I am sure you are aware—fleeting and do not tend to remain long after waking." He steepled his hands in front of him then closed his fingers and rested his chin on his hands. "It was necessary to take you by surprise—I trust the overall experience was not altogether unpleasant."

"It wasn’t,” admitted Harry. He considered a moment before continuing. "Why did I need to remember this dream? What makes it important?"

Snape regarded Harry steadily and Harry knew he had asked the right question. He was interested this time, feeling very relaxed despite the unexpected Legilimency and the mixed images and memories the dream had stirred up.

"The potion you drank was a muscle relaxant laced with a mild—a very mild—hallucinogenic—and not a Muggle drug but one of my own creation. When taken on the tail of strong emotion—in this case, discussing that scar on your hand—and followed soon after ingestion by sleep, it tends to induce a specific type of dream. These dreams contain emotions and images that, once identified, are used to reinforce Occlumency shields. The images can be evocative, both positive and negative, but are not generally thought of as disturbing. You might argue that certain images in your dream were indeed disturbing..." he paused and Harry nodded, thinking of Sirius turning to ash, much like Professor Quirrell had when Harry was trying to save the Philosopher's Stone. "...but were you left with a feeling of dread? Was that the image burned in your mind upon awakening?"

Harry shook his head. He thought about pointing out that the only things burning in his mind when he woke from the dream were Snape's black eyes and the whispered "Legilimens." But to be fair, he wasn't feeling particularly sad or depressed right now.

Snape was continuing. "The amount of hallucinogenic is critical—too much and the user falls into horrific dreams involving one's greatest fears."

The statement didn't sound like a threat, but Harry could not help but note that Snape did have the power to tip his hand a bit too much when making that particular potion. His rational mind told him he should be incensed that he had been drugged without his knowledge—but he wanted to know more and knew that indignation—no matter how righteous—wouldn't keep Snape talking.
Thinking about what Snape had said about the dream itself brought up another question. "Why is it
called a see dream?" he asked.

"The ocean has proven to be a natural teaching aid for beginning Occlumens. It provides an almost
hypnotic background noise and has a proven calming effect on the mind. The ocean air has a similar
effect. Occlumency is not an art that comes easy to most. It is most difficult to learn if the mind is
troubled. A sea dream is a dream evoked by the ocean—by its sound, its smell, the feel of the salt air.
You will find that most—if not all—of your dreams while at Shell Cottage will be sea dreams."

Harry had realized his mistake as Snape began talking—he had meant sea, not see.

"Will you be drugging me again, then?" The question was actually sincere—Harry had not meant to
be flippant.

Snape raised an eyebrow. The gesture actually comforted Harry—nice Snape was scary, neutral
Snape was creepy, but sarcastic Snape…sarcastic Snape made him feel right at home. He grinned.

"With hallucinogens? After the dream that you just had? The last time I experienced that much
symbolism was at my Catholic grandmother's funeral service."

"Sir? Was that a yes or a no?"

Once again, as it had in the sitting room earlier, the corner of Snape's mouth twitched as if wanting to
begin a smile.

"That, Mr. Potter, was a no."

"All right, then." He chanced another smile, then quickly looked down at his notebook. "So what
does all this mean? It reminds me a bit of casting a Patronus—well, having to call up the strong
emotions, anyway."

"Well reasoned," commented Snape, managing to not make the statement sound like a compliment.
"The Patronus charm is indeed a type of Mind Magic. As is the Imperius Spell."

"I can resist Imperio," said Harry, rather softly, as if talking to himself. "And cast a Patronus. So why
am I pants at Occlumency?"

"While it costs me quite a bit to admit this, Mr. Potter, to be fair you were not pants at it. You simply
did not want to erect barriers in your mind. You wanted to continue receiving the dream visions. And
frankly, I didn't want to teach you to occlude. A lethal combination that nearly cost you and your
friends your lives." He was observing Harry closely as he made that statement, and Harry swallowed
a protest. "Note that I said a lethal combination, Mr. Potter. I assigned fault to both of us."

He didn't give Harry the chance to move into melancholy and self-blame over Sirius' death.

"Occlumency, Mr. Potter, draws heavily upon symbolism. You will need something representative
of a barrier, first. Think of it as a figurative defensive shield."

"Water," said Harry almost immediately. He remembered his dream, how the sword and his scar had
seemed distorted in the water. How the ocean separated him from his friends on holiday. He looked
up at his teacher. "Will water work?"

He couldn't interpret Snape's expression, but the man nodded. "It is not commonly used but it has
proven to be a strong tool for . . . some."
"What's more common, then?" asked Harry, curious.

"Stone or brick walls, metal bars, even flames. But mind you, these are the beginner's tools only, used for basic mind defense. Occlumency becomes a much more subtle art if one wants to occlude without one's attacker knowing you are doing so."

"Basic will have to be enough for me, then," said Harry. "I'm not exactly known for my subtlety."

"Hmmm...I can hardly think of a more subtle way of arriving at Hogwarts than in a flying Muggle car," commented Snape.

Harry rolled his eyes. "We don't have to argue the point," he said.

"Your barrier, then, Mr. Potter?" asked Snape, refocusing him on the original discussion.

"Oh. I'd like to try water first, then."

Snape nodded his acceptance. "You will also need something to use as a diversion or distraction. This must symbolize a strong and pleasant memory or an experience you always enjoy. As you close your mind with the chosen barrier, you must at the same time throw up a distraction. The distraction is more for yourself than for the Legilimens attempting to break in. It keeps you focused on something trivial... mundane... enjoyable."

"Flying, then," said Harry. He could already picture himself doing mental laps around a black lake on his broom, or perhaps on a hippogriff, a thestral... even a dragon.

Again, Snape nodded his approval. "Finally, you will need a way to make yourself disappear. Think of it as hiding—obscuring—your identity. Imagine surrounding your mind with a deep well, or behind a roaring waterfall. Offer your brain the diversion of circling above on your broom—keep yourself moving. If I were to attempt to break into your mind while you are in this state, and your barrier is strong enough, I would only see you on your broom, circling. Connect that to a real memory of flying—put yourself on that cursed hippogriff or in a Quidditch match. Then make yourself disappear. Disillusionment will work... or your invisibility cloak."

Harry shook his head. The water was in a deep and dark lake. He was gliding over it on Buckbeak.

"Ashes," he said simply, picturing first Sirius, then himself, turning to ashes and blowing away across the lake.

Snape nodded, apparently understanding.

"But why do I need to disappear?" he asked after a moment's more consideration. "Isn't the idea to stay distracted with the diversion?"

Snape looked momentarily confused, then seemed to comprehend. "You will not make the 'diversion' you disappear but the real you. With the barrier up and the diversion in place, you will attempt to make yourself disappear from your secure location behind—or within—your barrier." He stood up then. "We will begin to practice later this afternoon. It is nearly time for lunch now, and after lunch we will brew the scar treatment potion. Physical therapy will be at 2 p.m. daily, followed by reading—and dreaming if you are so inclined—on the porch."

"Professor Snape," said Harry as the man headed toward the kitchen and begin preparing their midday meal. "Would you mind telling me—when you occlude—what's your barrier? Or your diversion?"
Snape stopped in the doorway, facing the kitchen, his hand on the white-painted door frame. He paused a moment before turning back to face Harry. "My diversion is also flying," he answered carefully. "Come, you may help with the vegetables."

Harry followed him, wondering what had given Snape pause. He tried—and failed—to picture Snape actually enjoying flying on a broom. Didn't he say the diversion had to be an enjoyable experience? Suddenly an image came to mind—Snape the great bat of the dungeon, gliding through the air with his robes and cape billowing out behind, supported on nothing but air. More free, perhaps, than he had ever before been in his life.

Chapter 15

CHILDHOOD FRIENDS

Three hours later, Harry once again found himself on the sunny porch, *Mind Magic* in hand. He felt like he'd run a marathon, even though the physical therapy session had only lasted thirty minutes and had not involved running of any sort. The leg lifts Madam Pomfrey had prescribed were easy in the infirmary but infinitely harder with the small sandbag weights Snape had wrapped around each ankle. The calf exercises were simple toe stretches—standing up on his toes, holding for the count of three then slowly back down and right up again. These could be done anytime, most anywhere, and Madam Pomfrey promised Harry these particular stretches would help him with his stair climbing. Harry worried that the left leg seemed to be lagging behind the right, being generally weaker and more painful, and resolved to work it harder in the future.

He'd been on his feet for nearly an hour before the therapy, standing in front of a small cauldron set up on the desk in the unused bedroom upstairs—he imagined that it was Snape's "travel" cauldron—stirring a thickish purple paste in figure-eights every five minutes. The professor had had to Apparate out to the apothecary at Diagon Alley to procure some of the required ingredients, including dried leaves that, when crumbled, released an aroma that reminded Harry vaguely of the Quidditch locker room after a tough match. Despite the smell of that particular ingredient, the potion itself has more of a medicinal smell. Harry wondered if you could call this purple glop a potion but didn't spend a lot of time considering the point.

And that was after helping to prepare lunch. One would think that a potion master would be a fastidious cook, but lunch had consisted of only sandwiches, crisps and cut-up raw vegetables. Harry had been given a knife, taught a sharpening spell and left to slice carrots, celery, cucumber and a red pepper. Snape made the sandwiches and to Harry's utter amazement, cut off the bread crusts, just like Aunt Petunia had always done for Dudley when they were small. Harry (who had always been hungry despite the fact that the Dursleys didn't actually starve him even though he ate much less than what Dudley did) had always eaten Dudley's left-over crusts along with his own sandwich, earning him, for a brief time, the very much unwanted nickname of "Crusty."

Now, resisting the very pressing urge to nap again (how many times could one sleep in a day, anyway?), Harry found a beach chair against the back wall and set it up facing the windows. It was low with a slightly reclined back but not as comfortable—and sleep-inducing—as the lounge he'd napped on previously. He settled into the chair, propped both of his feet on the window ledge and opened the book. Snape had directed him to read Chapter 1, but the book's preface immediately caught his eye: *The Mind is a Magical Mystery* by Albus Dumbledore. It had to be the same Albus Dumbledore…the very one famous for having defeated Grindelwald in 1945. Every Dumbledore Chocolate Frog card had that particular bit of information on it. Harry paged back to the title page,
searching for a publication date. He really had no idea if wizarding texts were constructed like Muggle books, but beneath the author's name was the simple caption "1901."

**Did Dumbledore know Grindelwald?**

Harry looked over to the door leading to the kitchen but there was no sign of Snape. Besides—this was Snape's book. He had said so. He must know about the preface—must have wanted Harry to read it. Without further thought, Harry turned back to the preface and began reading.

Eight pages later, he reached the end of a surprisingly well-reasoned defense of a variety of mind magics that Harry would normally have a hard time justifying. He simply couldn't see himself ever using the Imperius curse, though Dumbledore's preface somehow seemed to justify its use under certain circumstances. Or Obliviate… another one with which he'd had personal experience …what right would anyone have to erase another person's memories? Dumbledore seemed to suggest that its use could be justified if *not* using it would cause greater harm, such as alerting the Muggle world to the existence of magic.

He wasn't sure what he thought of all of this. He had to remind himself that the book had been written more than ninety years ago. Things were different then, *people* were different. Still mildly disturbed, he moved on to the first chapter, "Introducing Occlumency," the crashing waves of a restless sea outside the windows soothing his restless soul.

He had finished the Occlumency chapter and had gone back to re-read the preface when Professor Snape came onto the porch carrying a green bucket and a pair of black trainers. Harry closed the book and watched him place the bucket on the table then bend down to unlace his boots. Harry couldn't help but watch. Changing one's shoes was such an ordinary process, yet with Professor Snape it seemed an incredibly personal act. Snape didn't pay any attention to him as he pulled off one boot, then the other, and lined them up carefully, heels together, against the wall beneath the window. They were made of leather of some sort, worn and comfortable looking, not at all like Harry would have imagined Snape's boots—not that he had ever before given them a second thought. But now that he thought of it, he'd have been sure that Snape wore uncompromising boots of stiff black leather, with steel-tipped toes (useful for both protection against dropped cauldrons and for kicking the arses of wayward Gryffindors). Not surprisingly, Snape's socks, like the boots and the trainers, were solid black.

Snape finished tying the black laces on his trainers then stood.

"What are you waiting for? Come on, then," he said, picking up the bucket and walking toward the door that led to the narrow stairs going down to the shore.

Harry put down his book and stood up. His legs felt better after the hour he'd spent reading but he shook out the left one which was beginning to cramp. Snape already had the door open and Harry followed him out and down the stairs.

"Where are we going, sir?" asked Harry as the sea breeze blew back his hair and the salty air scoured his face pleasantly. He noticed for the first time that Snape had his own longish hair tied back at the nape of his neck with what seemed to be an ordinary rubber band.

"You will be helping me collect a species of shellfish—a mollusk—that is ubiquitous on these shores. When pickled—and yes, Mr. Potter, you will be helping me pickle them too—they are extremely useful in a variety of potions and unguents."

Harry followed the professor down another set of stairs, this one wider than the first and made of flat stones, then out onto a wide stretch of rocks and sand, littered with driftwood and debris. Snape
walked closer to the water's edge and dipped the bucket in, partially filling it with sea water. He then set the bucket down and bent to pick up a small black and white striped shell from the beach which he tossed to Harry.

"You'll find these a few inches down in the wet sand. You will have to kneel close to the water." He showed Harry the bubbles that rose to indicate the creature's position, then found sticks for each of them to use as makeshift shovels. "I warn you—they are very fast and can dig down very quickly out of your reach."

They spent what was for Harry a very enjoyable hour probing the sand and scooping out the shellfish. Harry was essentially limited to one hand, as his right arm, though no longer in the sling, was stiff at the elbow and he had little strength in his grip. He had found a narrow piece of driftwood with a wide, spoon-like ending and used it to fling the shellfish out of the sand. He had to move steadily outward as the tide withdrew. By the end of the hour, the bucket was more than half full. "Enough," said Snape at last, standing up effortlessly and tossing his stick out into the waves.

Harry gave up on the particularly elusive mollusk he'd been chasing and dropped his stick. He wiped his sandy hand on his pants legs. From his kneeling position, he got his right leg up and struggled to his feet. Snape put a steadying hand on his arm until he had righted himself, but didn't offer a hand to pull him up or make any comment at all. Once Harry was steady, he picked up the bucket. "You should come in as well—get those shoes off and let them dry out."

Harry looked down at his shoes. He'd had this pair for several years now and they finally fit him, but were so worn that the stitching around the tongue and eyes was unraveling.

As they walked up the first set of steps to the cottage, Snape asked, "Did you finish your reading?"

"I got through the first chapter," said Harry. He paused a moment. "And the preface."

"Ah," answered Snape, continuing to walk up the path. "I imagine you have questions—I am surprised you have not already peppered me with them. You had plenty of opportunity this last hour."

"I'm not sure that I want the answers," answered Harry, quite honestly.

They climbed the stairs to the porch and Snape carried the bucket to the kitchen while Harry sat on the lounge chair and took off his wet trainers and socks. He flexed his toes then rubbed his aching calves. Stairs were going to be rough until he got his full strength back.

Snape came back out a few minutes later with two steaming mugs. He passed one to Harry. The tea, topped with milk, was a rich caramel color. Harry sipped it—no sugar. How did Snape know? He glanced up at his professor. Snape had placed his own cup on the table and was trading trainers for boots. He began speaking as he laced up his boots.

"I had the same questions you have. I was twenty years old when Albus Dumbledore handed me that book."

"Did they know each other?" asked Harry, suddenly very much needing to know.

"The headmaster's story is not mine to tell," answered Snape. "But I will tell you that Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald were childhood friends."

"Oh." It felt like a swift kick in the gut. "Like my mum…and you."

Snape straightened up and stared sharply at Harry, and though he didn't say anything, Harry thought...
that he'd somehow gotten it right. Snape reached into his pocket and tossed him a small glass jar filled with purple cream. "Apply that twice a day, a small amount only."

Harry caught the jar one-handed and screwed off the lid. A thought crossed his mind suddenly and he looked up at Snape, a question on his lips.

But Snape had already guessed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Harry," he said, surprising him with the use of his name. "Though it won't hurt to try." He turned and went into the kitchen. Harry could hear him running water in the sink as he lifted a purple finger and touched the scar on his forehead.

Chapter 16

H20

The bed in the room he had chosen had an old-fashioned feather ticking and a hand-stitched quilted coverlet in blues and greens. Sea colors, thought Harry. The room had its own fireplace—the main reason he had chosen it over the other—and for the first time Harry realized the cottage didn't seem to have electricity. He shouldn't have been surprised—after all, Hogwarts didn't have it either—but the cottage seemed almost Muggle otherwise. He had opened the window a crack as Snape had suggested that he would sleep better with fresh air coming in. The crank was a bit rusty, and he had finally managed to get it to turn freely when he was surprised by a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called out and Snape opened the door and took a step into the room. The room was illuminated only by two candles on the bedside table and a swath of moonlight through the single window. The candle holder was made of a piece of stained driftwood and it cast a twisted shadow against the wall. Snape, Harry noticed, was still dressed in the black trousers and white shirt, but his shirt sleeves were rolled up almost to his elbows now as if he had been grading essays and hadn't wanted to get ink blotches on them.

"You are ready for bed?" asked Snape. He was eying Harry but didn't comment on the old t-shirt he was wearing over faded pyjama pants. Neither fit him well—the t-shirt was far too large and the pyjama pants far too short.

Harry nodded, feeling awkward. Snape didn't move. He simply indicated the bed with a slight nod toward it, directing Harry to get in. Harry hesitated, but moved over to the bed and pulled back the covers, sitting on the edge on top of the white sheets, but not actually getting in the bed. What was Snape planning on doing, anyway? Singing him a lullabye? They'd made dinner together again, this time actually cooking the vegetables and potatoes to go along with the chicken pie, which Snape had produced, already put together—undoubtedly by the house elves at Hogwarts—from the cold cabinet that stood in for a fridge. Dinner had been followed by the promised "pickling of the mollusks," a wholly unpleasant task that involved scooping out tiny mollusk bodies from tiny mollusk shells with equally tiny silver "de-shelling" spoons and tossing them into a cauldron full of briny water. Collecting the little creatures had proven far more enjoyable than dispensing with them.

Snape had then turned Harry free until his ten p.m. bedtime (Ten p.m.? Was Harry twelve or sixteen?) and Harry had spent part of the time in the bath trying to scrape off mollusk parts (they were particularly disgusting under his fingernails) and the rest beginning letters to his friends. Writing was exceedingly difficult with his injured hand still only partially functional. It was difficult to grip...
the quill, so he exchanged it for a particularly fat one that he normally avoided. He managed letters only to Neville and Luna before he called it a night. He hoped they would understand why he kept abbreviating everything (Hi Nev, How R U?) and why there were ink spots in the margins and even over some of the text. He wasn't sure Snape would even allow him to send the letters, and he didn't have his owl here, but he needed something to do and was so far determinedly avoiding summer assignments. He had decided to ask Snape to post the letters for him next time he went out to Hogwarts or Diagon Alley.

Still sitting on the edge of the bed, Harry reached down and pulled his socks off from the toes, realizing that Snape might have something to say about his lack of slippers. But Snape was still regarding him silently, so he placed the socks on the floor and reluctantly scooted back into the center of the bed, pulling the covers up around his hips.

Snape seemed satisfied with this effort and dipped his hand into his trouser pocket, taking out his wand. He waved it and wordlessly conjured a straight-back chair, which he turned so that the back was facing Harry. He straddled the chair, resting his arms on the top of it.

"Perhaps you thought that the dream therapy this morning would be the extent of your Occlumency training today?" He looked pointedly at Harry, who looked blankly back at him. Really, Harry hadn't thought of it at all. He was too busy wrenching miserable mollusks from their marble-sized shells. In all actuality, Harry was just happy that Snape wasn't going to sing or read to him, or tell him a bedtime story, or worse yet, talk more about Umbridge's detentions. He'd never actually had anyone sing him to sleep or tell him a story at bedtime—anyone except his parents, of course, but his memories of his parents were limited to the day they had died and didn't involve lullabies.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry realized he had zoned out and looked up at his teacher. "Sorry…just tired I guess." He smiled apologetically. Snape eyed him a bit critically but now that he had Harry's attention, continued.

"Starting tonight, you will be going through a series of mental exercises at bedtime. You read about some of these in the first chapter of the Grindelwald book." He paused here, the question implicit.

"Mentally manipulating your shield material," supplied Harry after a moment of thought. "He discussed bricks—mentally laying them out to build a wall, or a fortress, or even a maze."

"Correct, but only after spending time acquainting oneself with the nature of the material itself," countered Snape. "Recall the section about the straw and the mud, forming the brick, baking it in the sun."

Harry nodded. Personally, he didn't see how "being one with the brick" or "getting in touch with your inner brick" could help one with Occlumency. He was suddenly rather glad he'd decided to use water as his shield. Was Snape going to make him reflect on individual hydrogen and oxygen atoms next? But the potions master continued, seemingly unaware of Harry's distraction.

"Fortunately, you have within your realm of experience an encounter with your shield material that is suitable for this first exercise. Mr. Potter, tell me—how did it feel to have gills?"

Harry gave Snape a half smile. He remembered the terror of the transformation, the sharp stabbing pain as the gills opened before he was all the way in the water, not being able to breathe—then that first gulp of water that passed through him, so different than air, but serving the same purpose of sending oxygen to his brain.

"I had no idea what the gillyweed would even do," answered Harry. "Dobby woke me up and
handed it to me and all he told me is that it would make me breathe underwater. I took it and ran right to the lake." He remembered how slimy and rubbery the gillyweed had felt in his mouth. "Have you ever used gillyweed, sir?"

But Snape was giving him one of those looks again—the ones that said he didn't quite believe Harry and the topic would be discussed later. He confirmed Harry's assessment when he said, "We will be discussing this Dobby and his gift of gillyweed at a later time, Mr. Potter. For now, let me revise my question. How did you feel in the lake…once you realized that you could indeed breathe underwater and got over the shock of having gills and webbed hands and feet?"

Harry tried to remember what it had felt like in those early minutes of the second task during the Triwizard Tournament his fourth year, before the terror of not being able to rescue his friends in time had set in. He'd felt light, and cool instead of icy cold. He remembered how murky it was, how all sounds were muffled, how his hands seemed to be magnified, how he couldn't see more than ten feet in any direction.

He had a sudden revelation—water had as much obscuring and distorting power as it had brute force. Since his conversation with Snape following the dream, he'd been thinking of the strength of water, as manifested in a waterfall or the stormy sea or a flash flood. He'd not given any thought at all to this other facet.

"Once I had the gills, I felt at home in the water," he finally answered. "It felt…right, I suppose. I could only see a short way in the murky water, and sounds were all muffled. I couldn't see the Grindylows—but they couldn't see me either until I was right on them. Shapes were distorted." He looked up at Snape suddenly. "That's odd, isn't it? I felt at home in the water, but all my senses were dulled. My eyes could actually probably focus better, but the water was so murky they really weren't much use. It was easy to get lost—and hard to know which direction was up."

"Water has life-saving properties yet can be extremely dangerous. It is a requirement of life yet frequently causes death. It is an apt shield material, but it will not shield you in the same manner as bricks and mortar or even iron bars, so you must devote time and effort to study it thoroughly. But if you learn to mentally immerse yourself in its depths effortlessly, you will become a successful Occlumens." He paused and picked up the Grindelwald book from the night table. "What else did this book suggest about your shield material?"

"That you experience it as a physical shield," answered Harry. "His examples were to actually close yourself in a stone room to practice, or behind a barred door or windows…" Harry trailed off and looked down at his hands in his lap. He'd found this part of the reading disturbing. Unfortunately, he'd been in those places already. He wondered if he'd chosen the wrong shield—if perhaps a cupboard under the stairs might have been more appropriate given his history.

"Tomorrow promises to be a very warm day," said Snape. He had been watching Harry closely, Harry realized, but didn't ask any more questions. "You will spend time in the water—I will teach you the bubblehead charm as you need to experience the water as a human would and not as a fish." Harry nodded and a yawn escaped. Snape stood, waving his wand to banish the conjured chair and placing the book back on the night stand.

"Now, your nightly exercises to prepare for Occlumency. As you have decided to use water as your shield material, this first week you will meditate on the properties of water each evening for a minimum of fifteen minutes after getting in bed and before falling asleep. Recall that your body is sixty percent water, your brain seventy percent. But first…." Snape pointed his wand at the mattress.

"Aqua Cubilus."
The mattress beneath him moved suddenly and Harry toppled over on his side. He put his hands down to push himself up again, producing a wave in the mattress that spilled him onto his other side. His brain finally caught up with his startled body and he flipped, rather like a fish, onto his back.

"A waterbed! You could have warned me!" He glanced over at Snape. His professor had tucked his wand away again and was regarding him with thinly veiled amusement.

"I believe you'll find that you sleep exceedingly well tonight, Mr. Potter. Your fifteen minutes will begin when I leave the room." He waved his wand over the bed and the tangled covers rose into the air, straightened themselves out and then fell down over Harry.

"Good night, Mr. Potter."

Snape left the room without another word, closing the door softly behind him.

After a moment, Harry lay very still, feeling like he was floating on the bed below him. He felt heavier than usual, every inch of his body molding to the mattress in motion below him. He never quite got around to beginning his meditation as his body rocked like a boat with his every movement, soothed by the water beneath him. Just before he dropped off, he turned on his side and curled up in a foetal position and had the fleeting realization that a foetus was protected by water, hidden away in its mother's womb. He vaguely hoped he'd remember that in the morning. By the time Snape come in to blow out the candles when the fifteen minutes were over, Harry was fast asleep.

Chapter 17

TRUST

It was nearly noon the next day when Harry finished reading the second chapter of *Mind Magic* and put the book down on the table. He'd slept late, rolling out of bed with difficulty after 9 o'clock. He dressed quickly, then sat on the edge of the bed to pull on his trainers. He had one on his left foot and one in his hand when he remembered his realization from the night before. He put his right shoe on and tied it slowly, thinking of what he knew about pregnancy and gestation. It had been covered in Wizarding Health, the once-a-month class taught since first year by an exceedingly clinical Madam Pomfrey to an exceedingly embarrassed group of students. Boys and girls were taught together, and all had been introduced, without regard to gender, to exciting topics such as personal hygiene, puberty, the reproductive system, menstruation, nocturnal emissions, contagious diseases (which were different in the wizarding world than the Muggle—who in the Muggle world had ever had Dragon Pox?), contraception, (he was pleased at the time to learn there were spells for that too) and of course pregnancy and foetal development.

He clearly remembered the images Madam Pomfrey had shown them of a developing foetus. They played in 3D in the air and showed a baby in various stages of development, snug in its fluid-filled amniotic sac. He really thought he might be on to something but didn't quite know how to broach it with Snape. Perhaps, "Oh, Professor, I've decided to try to retreat into the womb as my Occlumency barrier." Or better yet, "Professor Snape, what do you know about amniotic fluid?"

He chuckled to himself, thinking about it again now that his reading assignment was over. The chapter he had just finished had actually been a primer on using the selected barrier and diversion to block out initial Legilimency attempts by the Occlumency instructor. The example in the book had been of a stone wall enclosing a spiral stairway leading to the turret of a tower. He imagined that he
and Snape would get to that practical instruction part soon, and frankly, he wasn't much looking forward to it.

Snape had been scarce today. There had been a note on the kitchen table instructing him to eat whatever breakfast foods he could find in the kitchen while Snape made a quick visit to Hogwarts. *And don't leave the cottage* was appended to the end of the note, after Snape's double S signature. Harry had been halfway through a second bowl of cold cereal, some sort of rolled oats mix that was fairly edible when loaded with blueberries and cream, when Snape Flooed back in. He heard Snape scooting something across the table in the sitting room, perhaps stacking up books he had brought back with him, and then the professor stuck his head in the kitchen to instruct Harry to be on the porch reading the second chapter by ten o'clock. He didn't comment on the fact that it was already nearly ten and Harry was not yet through breakfast. And Harry did not comment that the schedule he had given him yesterday had set reading time at two p.m.

"Good morning to you too," mumbled Harry as he heard Snape climbing the stairs to the bedrooms.

He'd heard the professor moving about in the kitchen as he read but had paid him little attention. The day was particularly warm, as Snape had promised yesterday, yet Harry was still surprised when Snape brought out two glasses of lemonade and sat down at the table, pushing a glass toward him.

"Thanks," said Harry, downing half the liquid in one go while Snape sipped more leisurely at his own. Harry put the glass back down. "I've finished the chapter."

"Do you have questions?" asked Snape, reaching across the table and pulling the book over to him. He flipped it open to chapter two.

"Um…not about this chapter particularly," answered Harry. "It was all practical stuff." He made himself continue. "But I do wonder about something in the preface—that part Professor Dumbledore wrote."

Snape's mouth tightened slightly, but he was either indifferent or feigning it well. "Go on then," he invited, as he flipped the pages of the book again, apparently going back to the preface.

"Dumbledore…I mean Professor Dumbledore…well, he seems to be justifying the use of certain questionable magics, in certain situations."

Snape closed the book and placed it on the table in front of him, straightening it out carefully. "Do you recall which situations?" he asked, in what was clearly his 'teacher' voice.

"When the benefit of using it does more good than the result of not using it," recited Harry. He'd read that part several times. "One example he gave was modifying the memories of Muggles who learn about the magical world. Or using the Imperius curse—perhaps to force a guard to unlock a prison door if the prisoners inside were actually innocent. I understand the examples—but who decides if the potential results do more good? What if a young Adolph Hitler was in that room of prisoners? Wouldn't keeping him locked up have better served the greater good in the long run?"

"You are beginning a discussion on ethics that could occupy the rest of the summer, Mr. Potter."

Harry shrugged. "I just found it odd," he said. "I'm not totally naïve. I know the world isn't all black and white but to justify an unforgiveable…"

Snape fixed his eyes on Harry. "You are young still, Mr. Potter. And the headmaster was not a lot older than you are now when he wrote that introduction. He did not have the life experiences he has now. My advice to you is to form an opinion but leave room on either side of it to change your mind
in the future. Now go get into that magnificent swimwear the headmaster created for you. We are going to begin your immersion therapy."

Harry groaned at the deliberate pun. He stood up and pushed his chair back under the table and returned to his room, holding on to the stair railing for support as he climbed. Before the accident, he'd managed to navigate Hogwarts' one hundred and forty-two staircases with practiced ease, running up entire flights two or three stairs at a time. He remembered one particular day when he and the other Gryffindor third years had managed to go down a narrow stairway in the north tower in only two jumps, swinging with both hands on the railings for leverage. The thought of doing that now and the remembered jarring landing made him shiver with phantom pain.

In his room, he replaced his jeans with the blue swimming shorts and left his t-shirt on. His legs looked bony sticking out of the wide leg holes, but he shrugged and made his way back to the porch. At least he'd gotten a bit of sun on them while he was at Hogwarts. Professor Snape was sitting at the table but in a different chair than when he'd left him, now facing the kitchen door. Harry's attention, though, was drawn not to the professor but to the stone basin on the table in front of him. Dumbledore's Pensieve. Now he knew why Snape had returned to Hogwarts.

"You didn't ask why I went to Hogwarts this morning," said Snape by way of greeting.

"Looks like you went for Dumbledore's Pensieve," responded Harry, walking over to the table and standing behind the chair facing Snape. Pensieves weren't exactly neutral territory for Harry and Snape, not since the incident last year where Harry had taken an unplanned side trip into this very Pensieve in Snape's office and had ended up seeing his father and his friends humiliate a young Severus Snape.

"Indeed," answered Snape, nodding to the chair. Harry pulled it out and sat down, his eyes moving from Snape to the Pensieve.

"The Pensieve has nothing to do with your Occlumency training," said Snape. "The Headmaster contacted me early this morning. He is in need of a memory from you—specifically, a memory of your detentions with Professor Umbridge. I flooed to Hogwarts to collect his Pensieve."

"What's happening with Umbridge?" asked Harry, happy to get the conversation moving away from the Pensieve. "I mean, has he told anyone? About the blood quill, I mean?"

Snape leveled his gaze on Harry and eyed him speculatively. "The Headmaster has presented a complaint on your behalf to the Wizengamot. He is personally representing you as you are still considered a minor in the Wizarding world. The council has requested a Pensieve memory from you of the event."

"Alright," said Harry slowly, reaching into his pocket for his wand and realizing he had left it upstairs in his jeans pocket on the bed. "I need to go back up for my wand, I suppose," he said."

"No need," said Snape, lifting his wand and incanting "Accio Harry's wand." They heard a strange thumping on the stairs and a moment later Harry's jeans flew into the room and landed on the table, his boxers falling out and sliding across the table to land in front of Snape. Snape regarded them coolly then lifted his gaze to stare at Harry.

"Oops," said Harry, quickly reaching across to grab the garments and extract the wand from his pocket. He shoved the boxers in the front pocket of the jeans and hung them over an empty chair. He couldn't help but think of telling Ron about this event when they were back at Hogwarts. Ron would probably want him to frame that particular pair of boxers—unfortunately an old pair gifted to Dudley during his Superhero days that had not fit him properly and had been passed down to Harry.
Snape raised an eyebrow as Harry's face reddened. "Pocket your wand as you may need it later. I will use my own wand to extract the memory. Your job is to bring the memory to the front of your mind. Hold it there and nod when you are ready."

Harry hesitated. He looked over at Snape. "I'm sorry, you know," he said, dropping his eyes back to the Pensieve. Still, he could feel Snape's eyes on him. "For looking at your memories that day. It was wrong and I shouldn't have."

Snape said nothing for a long moment, not until Harry chanced a glance up at him. "Apology accepted," he said then. If anything, he looked slightly surprised.

Remembering why Snape had removed those particular memories, Harry asked. "Will I still be able to remember what happened during detention after you remove the memory?"

Snape actually smiled. It was a bitter smile, but a smile nonetheless. Harry didn't know how he felt about the look on Snape, and doubted it was one he'd ever have to get used to.

"If only it were that easy to rid oneself of nightmares," he murmured. "Yes, you will still have the memory, though it will not be connected to other relevant memories and thus not easy to call up, and therefore much more difficult for a Legilimens to extract," he answered. He paused a moment. "Are you ready?"

When Harry nodded, he gave him further instructions. "Again, bring the memory to the front of your mind. Close your eyes to avoid other distractions. Hold the memory there and nod when you are ready. I will then touch my wand to your temple to extract it."

Harry closed his eyes and thought back to that first detention. Though it had been months ago—nearly a year, in fact—the details were still sharp. The searing pain, the satisfied, triumphant smile on Umbridge's face, the words cutting and healing and cutting and healing and finally cutting and not quite healing.

*I must not tell lies.*

He nodded.

He felt Snape's wand at his temple, drawing out the gossamer strand with a gentle tug. It hung onto the end of Snape's wand before dropping lightly into the stone basin, and Harry realized suddenly, and very keenly, that he had just allowed Professor Snape to put his wand to his temple. He trusted the man. He trusted Severus Snape. He didn't quite know what to think about that.

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Chapter 18________________________________________

IN UTERO

Fifteen minutes later, they were setting up beach chairs on the narrow stretch of sand and debris that could almost be called a beach. They’d lugged the chairs and a couple of towels down from the porch, Harry serving as towel boy—he’d draped one over each shoulder—while Snape carried the folding chairs. Harry wondered why he didn't simply conjure chairs out of driftwood or a dead fish or something, but then again, he didn't know how private their little strip of beach actually was. Of course, if he planned to do a Bubblehead charm on Harry, he could certainly risk a transformation or two. It wasn't worth asking, however. Snape would probably give him *that* look, the one that said "You cretin, isn't it obvious?" Harry, at Snape's instruction, had removed his trainers after they set up
the chairs, but had waded into the shallow water on his own volition, pressing his toes into the pebbled bottom. The water was cool after the toasty sand and the midday sun was warming up his clothes and skin nicely.

"The water is shallow for five or six meters out but drops off sharply after that. You can swim?"

Harry nodded his head. "Yes. The Weasleys taught me a couple years ago." He had learned from Ron and the twins two summers ago when he'd spent time at the Burrow after the Quidditch World Cup. He wasn't exactly as at home in the water as a fish, but he'd learned quickly to hold his breath, to tread water and to float, all skills necessary for survival when swimming with the Weasley brothers.

"You will need two charms. The first is the Bubblehead charm—it will give you an adequate air supply while you are submerged. The bubble will actually draw oxygen from the water as you breathe in it so there is no real limit on the length of time you can stay submerged. The second charm is a type of anti-buoyancy spell. It will keep you from floating to the surface for short periods of time—10 minutes or so. It is easily cancelled with a 'Finite' if you get into trouble and need to surface. You will surface at least every 10 minutes so I know you are not in danger."

He paused to make sure Harry understood the directions so far.

"What? What is it?" he asked, noting the expression on Harry's face.

"It's just…well, I had an idea last night, and I remembered this morning. It's a bit…different."

"Are you changing your shield material, perhaps from water to fire?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow. "Because if you are, I can assure you we are in the wrong place to practice."

Harry rolled his eyes at the sarcasm.

"No, it's still water. It's just a different…liquid environment."

"Go on," answered Snape, folding his arms.

"Well, it was the water bed that did it," answered Harry, dancing around the topic, somewhat uncomfortable about the subject matter still. "I felt like I was floating. Then I turned on my side and kind of felt like I was in a cocoon. And that reminded me of a baby….an unborn baby, that is."

Harry saw both the surprise on Snape's face as well as the sudden gleam of interest in his eye. He tapped his fingers on his elbow, arms still folded, and stared at Harry.

"Slow down, Mr. Potter. Allow me a moment to consider."

Harry stopped rambling and looked expectantly at Snape, who stared at Harry a moment longer then looked over his head out to sea. Harry followed his gaze and saw a dozen or so seagulls diving and rising up again over the waves. At last Snape spoke, and he seemed almost to be talking to himself instead of conversing with Harry.

"It could work. It could work extremely well, in fact. The third element—the disappearance—may not even be needed. The mind of a foetus…" He paused, apparently realizing he was thinking out
"Stay right here and wait for me. I'll need to wade in with you for this exercise to have the desired effect—just a simple variation on what I had planned."

He turned without another word and began to make his way across the sand to the stone stairs. Harry watched him go, wondering what had made Snape so intrigued. So Snape had to change into swimwear . . . the thought of Snape in a turn-of-the-century striped full body suit made Harry smile. He would have to work very hard to school his face if that happened—he was fully aware that traditional wizards sometimes dressed a bit old-fashioned. He removed his t-shirt while he waited, maneuvering his sore arm out carefully. Snape had rebandaged it just before they left the cottage and had then spelled the bandages to be waterproof. Dropping the shirt onto one of the chairs, he waded a bit further out then bent down and dipped his hand into the water, watching with fascination as the water seemed to part for his arm—in fact, it seemed as if there was a small force field around the skin, pushing the water out so it couldn't even touch him. That certainly wasn't how waterproofing worked in the Muggle world.

He spent several minutes dipping his arm in the water. As he reached for a stone in the shallows, he had a sudden flashback to his dream and how his scar had looked underwater. He felt vaguely disturbed, but a movement on the stairs alerted him to Snape's presence and he breathed a long sigh of relief to see that the professor wore knee-length swim shorts much like his own, though they were, of course, as black as most of his wardrobe. He was still wearing the same white button-down he'd had on all morning. Harry's eyes, however, were staring at the lower half of the professor while his brain repeated over and over "Legs .. Snape has legs…." The very small part of the leg Harry could see—from his knees to the top of Snape's back socks—was extremely white.

Snape stopped at the chairs and sat down to remove his shoes and socks.

Now Harry's brain had something new to focus on. "Feet feet Snape has feet," it declared. The feet were as white as the legs, but topped with such a thick mat of hair that Harry was reminded of Tolkien's Hobbits. He had read *The Lord of the Rings* the previous summer, finding the almost brand-new books in a charity bag Aunt Petunia had packed and left by the door. He suppressed a laugh with difficulty. He had a hard time seeing Snape as a Hobbit. Mr. Weasley, maybe. Dumbledore would be Gandalf, of course, and Voldemort Sauron….

His musings were interrupted by Snape standing up, wand in hand.

"Follow me," he ordered without preamble as he walked several paces into the water, not bothering to remove his shirt. Harry was not-so-secretly glad. He wondered if his eyes could stand the reflection of the sun off all that white skin. He followed the professor out several meters until the water came up over his knees and his swim shorts were getting wet. Snape, who was several inches taller, was still dry.

Snape eyed him speculatively for a moment. "This might be tricky so bear with me. In essence, I'll do a Bubblehead charm first, then encase the rest of you in a bubble filled with water to simulate the amniotic environment. I'll have to breach the second bubble temporarily so that it fills with water. You should then be able to float naturally slightly under the surface. Wade out a bit further—waist deep should do it." He waited while Harry resolutely trudged forward, a bit unsure about how this would turn out. "Good. Ready?"

"No—not yet!" said Harry, suddenly panicky. "Will I be able to get out when I want? What if something happens and I can't breathe?"

"Both valid questions," answered Snape. "You have your wand, yes?"
Harry patted the zippered pocket of his swim shorts. "Yeah, it's here."

"A simple 'Finite Enchantatem' will end the bubble spells. Do not hesitate to use it for any reason whatsoever—if you have trouble breathing, if you begin to panic, if you become claustrophobic of if you see a shark."

"Hey!" said Harry. "Are there sharks around here?"

"No, but it is reassuring that you are paying attention." He pointed his wand at Harry and produced a string of Latin that produced the desired bubble around Harry's head. His vision was slightly distorted by the curve of the bubble, but still clear. The bubble encased his head like the headpiece of a diving suit, but was flexible and felt like it was growing out of his neck instead of simply being attached to it. He reached up with his left hand to touch it. It felt satisfyingly slippery.

"Now you will have to submerse yourself," said Snape, taking two steps to get closer to Harry. Fold yourself up—grab the back of your legs behind your knees. You will not be able to straighten out fully until you end the spell but you should be able to move both your legs and arms somewhat. Can you reach your wand? Good. Don't worry about drifting—I will keep you within sight and in this general area, even when you are underwater." With that, he waved his wand and said "Rutilus Pardus" and smirked as Harry's formerly unobtrusive blue swim shorts turned a bright red.

"Ready?" With Harry's nod, he repeated the Bubblehead charm, but with a much broader sweep of his wand and a slightly different incantation.

Harry immediately felt himself rise to the top of the water in his new bubble. He listed over to his side and floated gently on his back, finding that he had some control over the movement of the bubble. It was distinctly odd to bob around, though actually quite pleasant, especially when he remembered he didn't have to hold his breath and began to breathe freely again. The pleasant feeling did not last too long, for Snape breached the bubble slowly with his hand, keeping the hole open with his wrist and turning the bubble so the hole was underwater. Sea water began to flow in, surrounding him with an initial cold shock until his little capsule was full of water and began to slowly sink toward the shallow sea floor.

For a moment, Harry considered how ridiculous he must look, curled up inside a bubble of water with another bubble around his head. It would be a keen practical joke—if Snape were inclined to play practical jokes—to convince a student he had to become his barrier and watch him make a fool of himself standing under a waterfall (with the water ripping off his swim shorts, perhaps) or putting on a fire suit and running through flames (he then remembered that there are potions for that) or bobbing around the ocean in a simulated womb. But soon he forgot to think about such things as he looked out through his glasses, out through the bubble around his head, out through the bubble around his body and up at the sky beyond the surface of the ocean less than a meter above him. He could stare directly at the sun without even blinking, could no longer hear the wind or the waves, did not feel the salty air. He shifted to point his body downward, surprised to see a brown fish with dull blue fins dart by, but all was silent save an odd thrumming in his ears. The sea water that filled the bubble seemed to insulate him, buffering him from the full expression of his senses. He closed his eyes and pulled his legs tighter against his chest.

He could do this. He could lose himself in the sensation of being nothing, of being nowhere, of being protected and hidden and safe. Tonight, when he began his meditation, he could return here to this bubble, this womb, this cocoon. He turned to look upward again, wistfully wondering how much better his childhood might have been had he been able to occlude during those interminable hours spent in the cupboard under the stairs.
Chapter 19

EMOTIONS

The rest of the day had passed quickly—the immersion experience followed by more reading, then physical therapy, an unplanned nap, preparation for dinner and then dinner itself. Harry had not been able to resist trying out the hammock that Snape had hauled out to the porch while he was reading, hanging it on two hooks obviously placed there for that purpose. Predictably, he'd fallen asleep, but this time Snape had not awoken him during the dream, and it was several hours later when the images from it rose to the surface of his consciousness.

They ate dinner on the porch as the sun was beginning to set. The fish and chips had come straight out of the cold cabinet, ready to eat with a simple warming charm, but Snape had once again given him a knife and this time, several yellow apples. He'd been instructed to peel them, core them and slice them. Harry had the vague feeling that he was practicing for potions—he had had two days of slicing and figured dicing, chopping or pulverizing was next. He regarded the finished product—crunchy whitish-yellow slivers that blended in colorlessly with the fish and chips.

"No mushy peas?" he asked as they ate, understanding why they were often served with the otherwise bland-colored meal.

"You can't be serious," answered Snape dryly.

After dinner, Snape had called Harry into the sitting room, where he lit the oil lamps and placed two of them on the low table in front of the sofa. Once again, as on the day they arrived here, Harry found himself sitting on the middle cushion of the sofa with Snape sitting across from him in the plush chair.

"We have a lot of material to cover in the next days," began Snape. Harry squirmed a bit, getting more comfortable for what he suspected was likely to be a long conversation. "I do not think it wise to push you too hard in the beginning, though you made great progress today in the water. But I will tell you now that you must begin to put everything you learn into play by next week. As you learn to manipulate your barrier effortlessly and to keep up your diversion, you can still become distracted by emotion. This is especially probable when the attacker discovers an emotional weakness and hammers directly on that spot. If you recall our lessons from last year, you may remember certain of your memories that played out more frequently than others. A skilled Legilimens can maneuver into a miniscule crack, discover the most insignificant weakness."

Harry was not looking at Snape. He had his eyes fixed on the flame in one of the oil lamps. He wasn't remembering his Occlumency lessons during this fifth year so much as something else, something more recent.

"But when Voldemort possessed me…at the Ministry…it was my emotion that forced him out. The…love I felt. Dumbledore said so." The name Voldemort escaped his lips so readily that he didn't even think about its effect on his professor. He looked up and saw Snape flinch slightly but he didn't correct Harry.

"Possession is not the same thing as Legilimency," answered Snape, "though the two share common…intrusive…elements. The Dark Lord is skilled at both—as evidenced not only by the events at the Ministry of Magic but by your entire second year with the Chamber and the diary. You will have to accept that I am right about this—you must deal with certain emotional aspects of your past in order to close those cracks and truly succeed as an Occlumens. The emotions that put you
most at risk to intrusion are negative ones—anger, fear and guilt in particular.

Harry felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. He wished he hadn’t eaten so many of the greasy chips. He had a very good idea where this was going. Once again he dropped his eyes to his lap.

"Over the last days, beginning with the incident of your uncle running you over with his car, I have had the distinct pleasure of getting to know a Harry Potter that I did not know existed." Harry looked up in surprise—now that was unexpected—but dropped his head again as Snape continued. "I attribute some of this experience to the fact that I was—and am still—experiencing you in a new context. By that I mean that you are not at Hogwarts wearing a Gryffindor uniform and I am not in front of a group of careless students doing their level best to blow up my classroom. However, I also believe you have matured—the Harry Potter that came to Hogwarts and then to Shell Cottage after the accident is indeed one that did not exist before. I believe that maturity has come in part from having to deal with the emotions brought on by your Godfather's death—and of learning of the Prophecy."

Harry jerked his head up at that. What did Snape know about the prophecy Did Dumbledore tell him everything? Did Snape know what he had done to Dumbledore's office?

 Snape's expression inexplicably softened. "Do not be so surprised. When the headmaster asked me to take on this task—to bring you here and to train you as he trained me—I gave him every argument in the book. I acted as much like a petulant child as you often do—more so, even, if I am to believe the headmaster. Albus was finally able to convince me that you were growing up, that you were now mature enough to handle the stress these weeks would cause—separated from your friends, thrown into day to day existence with the Professor you hate, made to face your fears."

"I don't hate you," said Harry, still gazing at the steady flame of the lamp. The lamp's chimney must have been very old, for the glass was wavy, causing the flame to appear elongated.

"No, you don't. Not anymore. I am aware of that."

Harry broke his gaze away from the flame and looked at Snape. He could not help the smile that flitted across his face. One could say it was almost a guilty smile—as if he had been caught in a minor transgression.

"While I believe you have made a great deal of progress in only two days, there are still things that must be brought out into the open. You must face these directly, so you can begin to heal. Facing them will make you stronger—and not only as an Occlumens. And if you understood the prophecy as I understand it and as Professor Dumbledore reads it, than you know that this strength will ultimately be needed."

"I don't want to talk about Sirius," said Harry quietly. Not with you was unspoken but understood.

"Fine. Then we will start with the abuse you suffered from that cow Petunia and the walruses with whom she lives."

That was perhaps the last statement Harry would have ever expected to come out of Professor Snape's mouth. His own mouth dropped open, wanting at the same time to protest the word 'abuse' and goggle at his professor's uncannily accurate description of the Dursleys. Protest won out.

"I wasn't abused. I … I was … neglected."

"Semantics," said Snape. "Your guardians withheld basic human comforts, made you sleep in a cupboard and showed you no affection. Were you ever hugged there? Did Petunia read you stories at
bedtime? Were you rewarded when you did well in school? Did she hang up your artwork when you were small? Did you go on family outings? Did they even buy you your own clothing?" The questions came hard and fast, and Harry did not think it fair at all.

"No, they didn't do those things. But what of it? They hated me. They were afraid of magic and I was always doing something weird that embarrassed them. They never wanted me. They didn't ask to take me in."

"You are defending them? It is acceptable to make a child sleep in a broom cupboard? To run a child over with a car and then worry about whether that child would bleed on the seats? Do you realize, Harry, that while we were preparing to move you to Hogwarts you asked us to return your uncle's car? That returning the car was the first thing on your mind when you were suffering broken bones and blood loss? Do you love these guardians, Harry? Would you miss them if you never saw them again?"

Harry looked up to meet Snape's eyes. He blinked. "No, I don't love them. I wouldn't miss them. But I don't want anything bad to happen to them either. I don't care about revenge." He paused, hoping Snape could hear that he was sincere. "I just don't want to have to go back there again."

"That is not my decision…unfortunately," answered Snape, leaning in toward the table that held the lamps and gripping the edges with his hands. "Harry, why do you somehow feel responsible for how the Dursleys treated you? That you were placed on their doorstep is not your fault. This conversation alone will not heal this guilt. But you must start somewhere. And I know the perfect place."

"What?" asked Harry. He should not have been surprised when Snape scooted another small notebook and pencil across the table to him.

"You will begin by recalling every positive thing you know about, feel or have experienced with the Dursleys and write them all down in this book. Include, if you must, acts of kindness you have witnessed them perform, even if you were not the recipient of said kindness. I know it's a small book, but I have more if you fill it up."

"They treat Dudley well. They spoil him to death." He managed to say it without bitterness, almost as if arguing for his tormentors.

"Do they? Has he turned out to be a fine human being? Did their shining example shape him into a good person?"

Harry looked at the book in his hand, and then he looked at Snape sitting across from him, looking a trifle smug. He looked again at the book and then set it back down on the table and pushed it across to Snape. He honestly could not think of a single example of kindness they had shown to anyone but each other.

"I'm done, sir," he said.

"Good," said Snape, picking up the notebook and putting it on a side table on top of a stack of books. He regarded Harry evenly for a moment. "I know I have overwhelmed you tonight, but it was a necessary first step. Unfortunately, we cannot stop with this discussion. Tomorrow we will discuss your first sea-dream in more detail, identifying the symbolic elements that have significance to this discussion—those that have important emotional context. And tonight…tonight you will reflect upon guilt before you go to bed." He picked up a larger notebook now and handed it to Harry. "Consider this a journal of sorts. I will not read it, but I will check that you have written in it daily. Today your topic is guilt—what it means, when you feel it, what specific incidents have engendered the feeling in you. We will be discussing this further."
Harry scowled as he took the notebook. "Are you licensed as a psychiatrist?" he asked, not even trying to hide the sarcastic tone. No, they had not spoken about Sirius tonight but they had tackled the emotion that Harry dealt with daily regarding his death, and now he had been instructed to go write about it. He realized he'd been duped—next time he'd be a bit more savvy and try to stay a step ahead of Snape.

"Let it suffice to note that I am very experienced with teen angst," answered Snape. "And I am well acquainted with the mind magics. Nearly fifteen years ago I sat where you are sitting. The Headmaster had the audacity to have a very similar discussion with me, about a very similar emotion."

Harry glanced down at the notebook.

"Yes, and he gave me a similar assignment. Though he gave me a roll of parchment and a quill."

"Did it help you?" asked Harry.

"Ultimately—yes."

Harry raised his eyes and stared at Snape. There was a lot more here, a lot he wasn't saying. He supposed it was enough to know that Snape had been on this very same sofa facing similar fears, though Snape had had to face Albus Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes instead of the depthless black ones that looked right through Harry now.

Harry dropped his gaze and clumsily picked up the pencil with his right hand.

"You will concentrate better out on the back porch," said Snape, standing and picking up the lamps. Harry followed him to their customary table, where Snape put down the lamps, took out his wand, and spelled them brighter. He then pointed his wand at the pencil Harry had placed on the table.

"Engorgio."

The pencil's girth increased until it was the size of a colored crayon like those used little children. Harry picked up the pencil and opened the notebook. Snape retreated to the other side of the porch and sat on the hammock, looking out over the sea where the moon had replaced the sun in the sky. Harry heard the hammock strings creak as Snape adjusted his weight. The sound brought back a memory. A vague image of two people playing in the sand on the beach came to him. He closed his eyes to try to fix the dream image in place.

"That reminds me," he said, putting down his pencil after a moment and swiveling to face the professor. "I had another dream today, in that hammock."

Snape hesitated. "I don't want you distracted from that journal," he stated, looking pointedly at the open page, on which Harry had written the word 'GUILT' and underlined it three times. The rest of the page was still blank.

"It was about water, again. A moat, around a castle, I think…"

Harry watched as Snape visibly tensed. He stood slowly, walking a few steps closer.

"If you can recall it—bring it to the surface—we can extract the dream memory and review it tomorrow before I return the Pensieve to the Headmaster."

"Dreams are memories?" questioned Harry.
"No, but the memory of a dream can be viewed in a Pensieve. You will find the experience interesting. It will be a good lesson as well, to distinguish real memories from altered ones and from dream memories."

"All right," said Harry, obviously not convinced. He sat down again while Snape went upstairs to retrieve the Pensieve. He didn't flinch when the wand touched his temple, when the memory strand came forth with the gentle tug, when it dropped into the basin. Snape touched the not-quite-liquid surface with his wand and Harry saw the cloudy image of a younger Harry digging in the sand while Severus Snape built a sand castle.

Snape looked over at Harry sideways, pressing his lips together.

"Well, I did say castles and moats, didn't I?" said Harry cheekily. He picked up his pencil—again—at Snape's pointed stare—and began to write.

When he fell asleep an hour and a half later, he had finished a rambling two pages in his makeshift journal and had actually managed the prescribed 15 minutes of meditation. And while he was becoming more at home in his protective bubble, truly in tune with the liquid shield he had chosen, he found his thoughts straying to that brief glimpse of his dream memory and how Snape had reacted. He was reasonably sure now that Snape's own barrier was water as well, and he'd bet galleons that Snape's water took the form of a castle's moat.

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Chapter 20:

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SYMBOLS

Harry did not sleep in the next morning. At fifteen before eight, Snape knocked on his door and waited only a moment before pushing it open, announcing breakfast in fifteen minutes. Harry barely made it on time. He had trouble putting on his shoes as his hand hurt and his fingers felt numb and tingly. Fortunately, breakfast was bangers, toast and left-over apple slices, so he didn't have to do anything too dexterous in order to eat.

Snape finished before Harry and went out to the porch. Harry joined him a few moments later, standing beside him next to the Pensieve.

"Do you have objections to me viewing this with you?" asked Snape. "I would like to make sure you catalog the differences between a dream memory viewed in a Pensieve and a real memory."

Now that the dream memory was in the Pensieve it was even harder for Harry to recall it. So he shrugged, hoping there wasn't anything too humiliating in it. He'd had those kinds of dreams before—finding himself in Divination class completely starkers, or wielding a light saber against Death Eaters. Snape took his shrug as a yes and stirred the Pensieve until the sand castle scene glimmered again. He glanced at Harry and together they leaned down to view the memory.

As with his previous Pensieve experiences—well, those where he actually entered the Pensieve—he felt the familiar sensation of falling, then landing lightly within the memory. Unlike his previous experiences, however, the edges of the scene were blurry so that only a very limited piece of the beach was visible. The sea must have been right behind dream Harry and Snape, and Harry could hear the softly slapping waves, but they weren't visible. The dreamscape seemed to disappear in haze where the sea should be.
Harry focused back on the figures. Dream Harry appeared to be several years younger—perhaps only 11 or 12. He was wearing worn jeans and a too-large green t-shirt that hung down over one shoulder. He was busy digging a straight trench in the sand with a stick, seemingly delighted at the way the water rose up to fill the hole. His glasses were held together by a bit of tape at the bridge of his nose. Dream Snape was kneeling several feet away, dressed in his Hogwarts teaching robes, which were hiked up so that he was kneeling directly on the sand. He was using his hands to sculpt an elaborate sand castle.

The real Snape spoke softly from beside him. "By now you have noticed that the extent of the dream venue is limited to the central action. The beach disappears beyond this, as does the ocean. This is the easiest way to discern if the memory you are watching is a real memory, or the record of a dream."

Harry had noticed these things, of course, but his attention had refocused on his younger self. Dream Harry—child Harry—had stood up and was regarding the castle his instructor was building. "It looks like Hogwarts," he stated, pointing to a spot on top with the stick in his hand. "That looks like the astronomy tower."

"It could be Hogwarts," answered Snape, "though there are a great number of castles in Scotland and Wales. It could be any one of them."

"Do they all have astronomy towers?" asked dream Harry. Harry could detect skepticism in his voice. Harry clearly remembered not trusting adults at that age—or ever, to be honest.

Snape didn't answer. He was using a fingernail to add detailing to the façade of the tower. "Is it safe?" asked dream Harry after a moment, taking a step closer. "It could be safer," answered dream Snape. "Some castles have moats."

Beside him, Snape had been very still. Harry glanced over and saw that he was watching the unfolding dream intently. "I can add a moat," answered Harry. He began tracing a curved line in front of the castle with his useful stick. Dream Snape appeared to have finished his work, for he sat back on his heels and watched dream Harry work. It took little time to complete the moat, even with dream Harry rounding out the edges with his hands. Harry glimpsed a wave or two as dream Harry worked on the ocean side of the castle, but they disappeared as he completed his circular moat.

The moat had filled with water as Harry dug. "Is the castle safe now?" asked dream Harry again of dream Snape.

Dream Snape eyed the trench critically. "It's safer," he answered. "It could be safer still, though."

Dream Harry thoughtfully regarded their creation. It was evident by his next statement that someone had told him stories as a child—or he had read them himself—for he firmly stated: "It needs a moat monster—a sea serpent, perhaps."

Dream Snape nodded his approval. Dream Harry lifted the stick in his hand to his temple as he leaned in over the moat. A strand of memory soon clung to the end of the stick, and dream Harry shook it softly over the moat. The strand fell into the water, where it began to froth and divided into a half dozen or more shorter strands. Soon, the miniature forms of a giant snake, a basilisk, an oversized spider, a dragon, a troll, a three-headed dog, a blast-ended skrewt, a disembodied brain and
curiously, a small domestic dog were all flailing about in the water. Harry noticed that his perspective changed and the castle and moat appeared much bigger now that they were the sole focus of the two dream figures.

"They can't swim," stated dream Harry sadly.

"No, they can't," said dream Snape, rather matter-of-factly. The two continued to watch silently as the small figures disappeared one by one beneath the waters of the moat.

And that was that. The dream memory simply ended and the dreamscape dematerialized. Harry found himself once again standing next to Snape beside the Pensieve.

"I think," said Snape wryly, "that this is an appropriate time to begin our talk about symbolism."

"You think?" asked Harry. "Even I understood that one. Are you sure that the sea is what's doing this to me?"

"Doing what to you?" asked Snape as he beckoned to Harry to follow him. He had picked up two beach chairs, but this time headed to the front door instead of down to the seaside through the back porch door.

"You know—making me have these odd dreams," answered Harry. "You have to admit that one was odd." He stood beside Snape in the front garden while Snape set up the chairs to face each other.

"I will admit it was very focused," said Snape. "I suspect, in fact, that you had something very specific on your mind right as you fell asleep in the hammock." He settled into one of the chairs and Harry sat down in the other. "Care to share, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't…" but he did. He did remember what he had been musing about as he swung back and forth in that hammock yesterday. He'd been thinking of his experience in the water, bobbing around in the simulated womb, learning to desensitize, to shut out all thought and all noise. He'd practically been in a trance when Snape had popped his bubble, literally and figuratively, ending the Bubblehead charm and pulling a startled Harry from the shallow water. He had dared to ask Snape then, as they sat on the beach chairs, drying in the sun, what his own Occlumency barrier material was.

Snape did not answer at once. But when he did, Harry was reminded of Dumbledore's non-answer about his mysterious glove.

"I think you will have to find that out yourself, Mr. Potter. Perhaps before the end of the summer I can introduce you to Legilimency."

Now, though, Harry knew he didn't need to learn Legilimency to guess Snape's barrier material. He remembered Snape's reaction when he had chosen water himself, and had asked him if it was an adequate choice. "It has proven to be a strong tool for . . . some." He hadn't thought much about it at the time, being wrapped up in the first sea-dream, but the pause, the hesitation, spoke volumes.

Now, sitting in the garden with Snape, facing each other in low chairs more suitable for the sand than the grass, Harry considered carefully before replying.

"Right before I had this dream, I was thinking of what you might use as your barrier, sir," he answered. "And I was thinking that it must be water—you sure have some very good ideas about it, anyway, and have been very supportive of me using it too."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "My barrier is indeed water," he answered. "And it is true that it is not as
commonly used in Occlumency as others. Interestingly, I began my Occlumency training using the moat environment, just as your dream depicted, though I no longer use it. It became...less effective...after a time." He didn't offer more about himself, but continued with. "What does the dream mean, then? You indicated you understood it."

"The whole dream is about successful Occlumency," he answered. "The moat is the barrier, water the barrier material. The castle is what is being protected—the Occlumens, I guess. The monsters are the attackers and they're unsuccessful in breaking through the barrier."

"A valid interpretation, and the most obvious given our purpose in being here," said Snape. "Are there others?"

"Others?" asked Harry, clearly confused.

"Yes, others. Other ways of interpreting the dream. After all, I promised you a discussion of symbolism today, and how the elements in your dreams can help you with Occlumency. Dissect it further. What of the stick?"

"The stick?" Harry felt like a parrot and tried to come up with something. "Well, I used it to dig, and as a wand."

"And as a pointer. Where was your shovel?"

"I didn't have a shovel. I had a stick."

"Children at beaches have shovels."

"I didn't. I had a stick. And besides, this was a dream."

For the second time in his life, Harry saw Snape smile. It was not bitter like the one he'd allowed when Harry had asked if he'd remember his detention after removing the memory of it. Instead, it was a pleased smile. Harry suddenly understood that Snape was enjoying egging him on, playing with him.

"Fine. The stick is a tool, then, right? A versatile tool. It can be a shovel, or a wand, or a pointer. In the Muggle World, kids use sticks as guns and swords all the time. And light sabers," he added, teasing.

"I am acquainted with Star Wars," answered Snape. "I was about to start my final year at Hogwarts when it was released."

Harry's mouth dropped open.


"You went to the cinema?" asked Harry. "You know about cinemas? About movies? Ron had never even heard... Wait a minute."

Snape continued to gaze steadily at Harry. The gears were turning very fast in Harry's mind. Snape had said that he and Lily were childhood friends. But Harry hadn't really thought about what that meant. Not until now. If they were childhood friends, did that mean they knew each other before Hogwarts?

"You ... you grew up in the Muggle World? You're Muggle-born? Like Hermione? Like my mum... No..."
"We are quickly getting away from our discussion of dreams," answered Snape. "I told you very little about your mother and myself—just enough to sate that incurable curiosity you exhibit. And I will tell you just enough now to answer your question. Then we return to our topic. No, I am not Muggle-born. I am a half-blood, like yourself, though in honesty, both your parents were wizards while only my mother was magical. My father was a Muggle. Your mother and I—and by default your lovely Aunt Petunia—grew up in the same neighborhood. Now, enough. Give me another symbolic element from the dream."


"Mr. Potter."

Harry swallowed and looked down at his hands. He should be grateful, he knew, for this small amount of information. Yet it really wasn't enough. Not nearly. But things were going very well between himself and Snape. Maybe he could work in more questions here and there, surprise him into revealing something else when he was in a particularly relaxed mood. "Right. The castle…."

Thirty minutes later, they had thoroughly dissected the dream and Harry understood that the castle could represent safety, or home and that the monsters could have been there to protect the castle, not attack it. In that case, their demise would be because the barriers were not strong enough instead of too strong. They then discussed why Snape was in his teaching robes (there were several interesting theories) and why Harry was not dressed as a Hogwarts student.

Snape did a quick tempus with his wand. Harry looked at the numbers hovering in the air. 9:30. They'd been at this an hour already.

Snape frowned at the numbers but didn't comment on the time.

"We haven't yet touched the first dream, and that is really what I'd hoped to accomplish today with you. I'd like to put some context around the dream as I saw it and let that serve as our starting point for discussion. Do you still remember the dream clearly?"

Harry nodded. "Writing it all down right afterward helped. I can still remember most of it."

Snape leaned back a bit in his chair and adjusted his legs, stretching them forward. "Think of the dream as an attempt to deal with the hurts you have experienced, the fears you currently have, and your uncertainty and fear of what the future may require of you. Remember that our dreams are our minds' way of sorting out these issues. A good place to begin is the beginning…"

"That was in the hallway, with Luna," supplied Harry. "Do the shoes mean something? I don't quite…" He stopped when he saw Snape's mouth twitch.

"I'm sure the shoes do mean something, but there's a more meaningful symbol in this scene, don't you think?"

"Well, the thestral. They obviously symbolize death."

"Do they now?" asked Snape.

"Well, don't they?" answered Harry, not really in the mood to play Snape's game. "You can't see them unless you've experienced death. They look pretty much like death warmed over—all bones and leathery skin and all."

"Yet they are living creatures who are born, who eat, who grow, who reproduce and who ultimately die. There are thestral foals just as there are kneazle kits and Cerberus pups."
"Well, they're related to death, anyway," persisted Harry.

"I'm not saying they are not," answered Snape. "I am merely asking you to look beyond the most obvious. When you see a thestral, what does it evoke in you? What do you think about?"

Harry didn't answer and Snape rephrased the question.

"Harry, who do you think about?"


"Exactly. Because a thestral isn't really a symbol of death, but a reminder of the dead among us. You cannot see one unless you have experienced death, but seeing one will often pull at our heartstrings, reminding us of those we have lost."

Harry nodded, feeling a lot more somber than he had when they had set up the chairs in the front garden and begun their conversation. "So, the thestral symbolizes my sense of loss?"

Snape's face softened. "Exactly. Now we will discuss Miss Lovegood."

"Luna?"

"Do you know a different Miss Lovegood? Of course Luna Lovegood. I have been wondering why she is the only one of your friends who makes an appearance in this specific dream."

"She was the one who told me I was just as sane as she was when I first saw the thestrals and no one believed me."

Snape mouth twitched infintesimally. Harry saw it and grinned. "Yeah, that really comforted me."

"I think there is more, though," prompted Snape.

Harry considered a moment, looking out across the garden at the butterflies flitting around the flowers. "I … I suppose I trust her."

"And you do not trust your other friends? Mr. Weasley? Ms. Granger?"

"Of course I trust them!" protested Harry. "Luna…Luna is just…different. It's like she's real inside. Pure. No matter what others think she's always true to herself. I admire that in her."

"Hence the unicorn," explained Snape. "Purity and strength. Inner beauty."

"She comes back again in the dream—on the tower."

"And you allow her to pull you onto the back on the thestral, which then dives over the side of the tower."

"I said it before—I trust her."

"And therein lies the rub," quipped Snape. "Trust. We will be continuing this conversation tomorrow, and discussing that very concept." Harry caught him watching his injured arm as he unconsciously flexed his hand. "How long has your hand been bothering you?"

Harry stilled immediately. "Not long. Well, since I woke up, I guess."

Snape sighed. "You do not even think of telling someone, do you? Well, Madam Pomfrey has
promised a visit today anyway and she will examine it. I will be leaving soon to spend the rest of the day at Hogwarts as the Headmaster has requested my presence. Please keep the original schedule we set for reading and physical therapy. You can fend for yourself for lunch. Madam Pomfrey will be here in time for therapy and will take care of your potions. Do not leave the confines to the garden fence if you feel you must spend time outside. And if you feel up to writing, continue in your journal and add the word 'Trust' to the top of a new page. I will return for a late supper. Understood?" Snape stood and folded his chair.

"Understood," answered Harry, standing as well. "What's going on at Hogwarts?" he asked casually.

"The Ministry is still there working on the wards," answered Snape. "The Headmaster simply wants me to be seen from time to time." He gave no other explanation but Harry understood. If Voldemort had a plant in the Ministry, they would not want to make it obvious that Snape was not at Hogwarts.

"Oh, and Mr. Potter…" Harry was folding up his chair as Snape paused on the front porch and turned to face him. "You'll have a lot of unstructured time today. I suggest getting a start on your summer assignments." He had the audacity to smirk as Harry's face fell.

Chapter 21

THE SUMMONS

Harry was downstairs before Snape the next morning. He took his tea out to the porch where his school books were still stacked on the table along with several roles of parchment and the charmed quill Madam Pomfrey had brought him yesterday—the one that responded to his voice and wrote whatever he said out loud. He'd had a few false starts with it while writing his Transfiguration essay, including a string of mild profanity it had dutifully transcribed when he spilled his pumpkin juice and it had spread out over the table and dripped onto the floor. He didn't think Professor McGonagall would appreciate her essay on the challenges of cross-gender transformation of corvus corvus corone described as an "idiotic assignment" and knew she would not want to hear the other more colorful phrases that slipped out of his mouth as he cleaned up the mess with a towel. Snape had instructed him not to use his wand unless necessary to protect himself as he was still underage and there was always the off-chance his underage magic could be detected.

Madam Pomfrey had arrived precisely at 2 o'clock the previous afternoon by way of Floo, her pristine robes still looking properly hygienic despite the sooty fireplace. She'd run Harry through his leg exercises first, tutting a bit over his still weak left leg and upping the number of repetitions on that side. Predictably, he'd gotten a lecture when she examined his arm, declaring that the nerve damage was worsening instead of improving. She'd banned him from all writing but had left him with the charmed quill. The fact that she had it with her to begin with told him that Snape must have spoken with her when he arrived at Hogwarts and she'd been anticipating a problem. She had applied the smoke potion and the scar cream and had doubled the dosage of the nerve regenerator, the awful grayish potion that smelled like Crookshank's litterbox and tasted even worse. She'd agreed to stay for tea when he offered but had insisted on preparing it herself while he rested in one of the comfortable lounge chairs.

"I've always loved this cottage," she said as she sipped her tea a few minutes later and bit into a plain biscuit. She regarded the half-eaten wafer critically then waved her wand over the plate, changing the remainder into chocolate digestives. She stood for a moment by the big porch windows, looking out toward the sea.
"You've been here before, then?" asked Harry, accepting a chocolate biscuit with his left hand.

"Oh, a few times," she'd responded vaguely. She'd finished her tea and had admonished Harry again to take care with his arm before Flooing away, leaving him with his thoughts and his essays. He'd fallen asleep after she left, his legs and arm achy, waking up an hour later feeling a bit better. That's when he'd tackled the Transfiguration essay, and he was still at it when Snape had arrived back just before six o’clock.

"Poppy was all over me when she returned," he complained, walking out onto the porch dressed in his teaching robes. Harry had already grown accustomed to seeing the potions professor in trousers and found that the robes looked out of place here at Shell Cottage. He watched as Snape placed a covered wicker basket on the table, stacking two books on top of each other to make room for it. "She's afraid you'll have permanent nerve damage in that arm if you continue to strain it. I believe she doesn't trust the efficacy of my nerve regeneration potion, hmmm?" He removed the cover on the basket and reached in to help himself to a piece of fried chicken.

They'd eaten together quietly and then Snape had suggested a game of wizard chess. Harry had frankly been stunned—he'd been sure they'd have to have a go at "real" Occlumency by this time—but had agreed to a game, and fifteen minutes later, to a second. Twenty minutes after that, grinning in defeat, he'd suggested going for three out of five.

He'd actually gone to sleep by nine, feeling more tired than usual. He'd done his 'trust' journaling in his room with the door closed, as he'd had to speak the words for the quill to capture them and thought he'd sound ridiculous muttering to himself in front of Snape. Besides, Snape hearing his journal was practically the same as Snape reading it. He only managed a paragraph on the new topic, mainly stating that one had to be extremely careful who one trusted and that it was usually best to simply depend on yourself, before he gave it up for Occlumency meditation.

Now, sipping his tea with the morning sun just peaking over the horizon, letting the hot cup warm his still slightly numb fingers, he felt vaguely unwell. His arms and legs felt heavier than usual, and he had an ache between his eyes. He attributed his discomfort to not sleeping well and to the more rigorous physical therapy yesterday and poured himself more tea, adding a trickle of milk and letting it warm him from the inside.

Snape woke him up an hour later for breakfast—he'd fallen asleep on the hammock again. After breakfast, he finished his Transfiguration essay and then they traipsed off to the beach for a second go at Snape's so-called immersion therapy.

The time he spent floating and sinking, bouncing and turning in the shield bubble was the best he had that day. When Snape pulled him in with a slow Accio and cancelled the charm, he asked Harry to estimate the length of time he'd spent in the water.

"I don't know—probably ten or fifteen minutes," answered Harry.

Snape's eyebrows rose.

Harry frowned."How long, then?"

"Almost an hour," answered Snape, looking greatly pleased. "I waded out twice to make sure you were still moving inside there. Did you fall asleep?"

"No—definitely not." Harry shook his head. "It's like time slows down when I'm in the bubble," he continued, looking quickly up to catch Snape's expression. "That's good, isn't it? That I lost track of time?"
Snape looked thoughtful. "It's good that time slowed for you, yes," he answered. "I wouldn't necessarily say you lost track of time. I think that we will repeat this exercise later this afternoon and begin one-on-one training tomorrow. If that is successful, we'll begin attack training the following day."

"Attack training?" asked Harry, biting his lower lip.

"When you least expect it..." provided Snape.

"Expect it," answered Harry with a sigh.

Snape began to wade back to shore but Harry, still waist-deep in the ocean with the sun climbing overhead, decided to stay in a bit. He settled into the water, backing toward shore a bit until he was comfortably sitting on the ocean bottom, gentle waves making him bob up and down as they pushed and pulled him. He stood up after a while and walked forward into deeper water.

"You're close to the drop off," called Snape from his seat on one of the chairs on the beach.

Indeed, the bottom was getting steeper, so Harry turned and paddled back in a meter or so until he could just stand with his head out of the water. He practiced floating for a few minutes, then treading water, and finally tried diving down to pick up handfuls of rocks and small shells off the bottom, examining them once he surfaced. He found an interesting, though dull-colored, spiral shell and an orange rock that looked like a piece of a roofing tile. He had dived down again and was under nearly two meters of water, on the steep slant of the drop-off, when intense burning pain hit him right between the eyes, centered on his scar. He screamed, so totally unprepared, so totally taken by surprise, not realizing that only bubbles escaped his mouth, and he reflexively took another deep breath. But without the Bubblehead charm he sucked in a great lungful of water and began floundering.

His brain was almost too fuzzy for rational thought or action, but he knew somehow that the pain had never been like this before. In the past, when he felt Voldemort, it had always been because Riddle had been experiencing some great emotion and he'd known it, known that he was angry, or intensely happy. Harry struggled instinctively to reach the surface, but he'd lost track of where the surface was and found his brain growing fuzzy through the pain. He was only remotely aware that his body had begun to move very quickly on its own accord through the water toward the shore, stopping in the very shallow water after scraping against the bottom for a couple of meters. Then hands around his shoulders pulled him onto the sand and turned him on his side and he was coughing up water, finally getting a deep, rasping, painful breath of air into his lungs.

Snape was kneeling next to him, grasping his own forearm tightly. Harry's vision was terribly blurry this close—where were his glasses?—and he couldn't see Snape's expression, but his voice was tight and worried.

"Occlude. Try, Harry. Erect your barrier—right now." He stood then and Harry heard the sharp crack of Apparition, but Snape was still there. He was looking at something behind Harry, then nodded and Disapparated on the spot, leaving Harry lying on the beach.

"No!" Harry closed his eyes again against the pain, now throbbing as well as burning.

But then someone else was there, kneeling behind him, hitting him between his shoulders from time to time, causing him to sputter and gasp until at last he was breathing more regularly.

"Block him, Harry," said a calm voice. "We'll talk later—just practice what you've learned. It was Bill Weasley's voice."
Harry nodded. Practicing his shield barrier was easy when he was floating in a bubble in the gentle ocean waters. This was not. There was burning pain to block, and pressure, and it was still hard to breathe. His side ached horribly where he had been dragged across the rocky shallows. But he pulled his knees up to his chest as best he could, wrapped his arms around them, closed his eyes tightly, and slowly, ever so slowly, began to sink into his protected underwater world. Gradually, the imagined heart beat of the ocean, the gentle thrum of a maternal heart, called him and he sunk into it.

A passerby, had there been one on that quiet, remote strip of sand on England's southwest coast, would have seen a red-haired man, his long hair in a tail on his back, fully clothed and wearing beautiful leather boots (the passerby would not have recognized them as dragonhide), sitting cross-legged in the sand beside a sleeping teenager. The teen was curled up in a foetal position, clad only in bright red swimming shorts, and the red-haired man was patting his back from time to time and checking his watch, checking his watch, checking his watch again.

When Harry pulled himself with difficulty out of his occluded world nearly an hour later, he blinked to focus his eyes then fumbled his left hand around for his glasses.

"Here," said a voice behind him, placing his glasses in his hand. "Didn't realize you'd lost them—they washed up a few minutes ago."

Harry groggily sat up, wiping sand off his cheek.

"Bill? Where's Professor Snape?" He closed his eyes, trying to think back, gradually remembering the burning pain that had ripped through his scar. The pain was remembered only—it no longer cut through him. "He was summoned…how long ago?"

"Only an hour, Harry," answered Bill. "How are you feeling?"

Harry shook his head slightly. "Head's better," he said. "Remind me never to go swimming again."

"The timing was … unfortunate," commented Bill. "Feel like standing? Let's get you back into the cottage." He helped Harry to his feet and handed him a striped beach towel. Harry winced as he wrapped the towel around his shoulders and it drug against his abraded side. It hurt to breathe still, especially when he took deep breaths. They left the chairs where they were and walked back slowly, Bill supporting him on the steep stairs to the cottage. Harry collapsed onto a lounge while Bill looked around then made his way into the kitchen. He was back in a few minutes with a steaming mug of tea, a bottle and a small glass.

He passed the tea to Harry and he took it gratefully, not bothering to ask for milk. Bill placed the glass on the table and tipped a measure of amber liquid from the bottle in it.

"Fire Whiskey," he stated. "You'll want to sip it slowly."

While Harry alternated sips of hot tea with sips of the bracing alcohol, Bill walked around the porch, picking up items to examine them and swinging experimentally in the hammock.

"How did you get here?" asked Harry as Bill stood up from the hammock and, like every adult who had been here, gazed out the windows at the sea.

"Apparated when Snape sent his Patronus," answered Bill. "I was on call." He turned and smiled at Harry. "Lucky you—got me both times."

Harry smiled vaguely then turned to look at the clock.
Bill frowned.

"Listen, Harry, he's likely to be gone for a while. You never know—but sometimes it's as long as a day or two."

"A day or two?" Harry snapped his head around to look at Bill. Despite the tea and whiskey, he was feeling shaky and tired. "Are you going to stay?"

"Today, yeah," answered Bill. "Listen, Harry, I'm going to Floo call Madam Pomfrey and get you something to put on those cuts—and a Pepper-up Potion. You look like you need it."

Harry grimaced but Bill left the room anyway. He was gone more than ten minutes but returned empty-handed. He sat down at the table across from Harry and took out his wand.

"Well, nix on the Pepper-up. Poppy heard from Mom a little while ago. Seems the Grangers contacted them last night—Ron, Ginny and Hermione are all down with some sort of virus—some sort of Muggle flu. She wanted to be sure you didn't have any symptoms before she gives you anything."

"What are the symptoms?" asked Harry, remembering the soreness he'd felt when he woke up that morning.

"Fever, body aches, sweating, congestion," answered Bill. "You probably have all of these—but there's no telling if they're from a virus or from nearly drowning and lying in the sun for an hour."

Harry sighed. "I felt sick this morning. Body aches and headache. I figured it was from physical therapy yesterday—Madam Pomfrey pushed me pretty hard." He rested his head on his folded arms and closed his eyes. Sick or not, he was worried about Snape. He considered, in passing, trying to open his mind, to see if he could establish a connection to Voldemort and… No. Bad idea. Very bad idea. He raised his head.

"I'm going to go lie down upstairs, Bill. Will you wake me when Snape gets back? If I'm not up already?"

"Sure, Harry," responded Bill. "But first we need to heal those cuts. Poppy said to use the potion she gave you to pour over the cut on your arm. Where do you keep it?"

"Kitchen," answered Harry. "One of the cabinets—I think the one to the right of the sink."

Bill retrieved the potion and Harry let the towel drop and leaned sideways while Bill poured it on. He nearly dropped the bottle when plumes of smoke hissed out of the scrapes. "Is it supposed to do that?"

"Yeah," Harry said, looking down at this side which already looked and felt better.

"Go on then," said Bill when he had recapped the bottle and picked up Harry's towel. "You need help getting upstairs?"

"No, I can make it," answered Harry. "Just wake me up, yeah?" He waited for Bill's nod then stood up carefully and left the room, leaving a very bemused Bill Weasley staring after him.

Chapter 22
"Harry. Harry!"

Someone was shaking him by the shoulder. The whole bed was rocking as Harry's body moved with the bed, making waves in the water-filled mattress. He opened his eyes. His head had fallen off the pillow and his face was resting directly against the water-cooled sheets. They felt nice against his over-warm skin.

"Wha' time izzit?" he muttered as Bill's face came into focus. He coughed against the rasp in his voice. Awareness came suddenly. "Is he back?" The question came out in a rough whisper.

"Not yet," answered Bill, adding, as Harry's face fell, "but he sent a message. He's got to go to his house for a while to take care of a few things. He'll be back tonight—might be late, though."

Harry had managed to pull himself up and was sitting with his back against the headboard. "His house? You mean Hogwarts?"

Bill smiled. "No, his own house, Harry. Where he lives when school's not in session."

"Oh." Harry had never before considered that Snape—or Sprout, or McGonagall, or Dumbledore, for that matter—had a home outside of Hogwarts.

"Listen, Poppy—Madam Pomfrey—flooded in to check you over while you were sleeping. She just ran some diagnostics without waking you. You're running a fever and have some severe chest congestion. She said your lungs are strained too from coughing up all that water so this flu virus may affect you more than it normally would. Anyway, she left a potion and you're to take it now."

Harry grimaced as he swallowed the potion Bill handed him. "Must be one of Snape's," he muttered uncharitably. He was worried about Snape and that, along with the virus' progress through his system, made him grumpy and irritable.

"You want to sleep some more?" asked Bill. "Sever…Professor Snape suggested we spend some time working on your Charms assignment. Something about creating an original spell?"

Harry shrugged. "Alright. My books are downstairs." Harry struggled out of the wavy bed and stood up. Bill reacted quickly, fortunately, and caught Harry as the boy started to tilt once he was on his feet. "Dizzy," said Harry, sitting down quickly then falling backward to lie sideways on the bed.

"Stay there, then," said Bill. He conjured a chair—quite a different kind of chair than Snape had conjured the first night in the very same spot. Bill's chair was low and wide and made of dark leather. He settled down in it and leaned in a bit toward Harry, elbows on his knees.

"So, feel up to telling me about the assignment?"

Harry managed to discuss the Charms assignment—to create a variation of an existing common spell—for the better part of an hour, going over a variety of possible variations on the hover charm (could you, for example, hover something only to a very specified height? Or raise part of an object and not the whole thing, such as the sleeve of a sweater?) before finally drifting off to sleep again. Despite conversing about hovering, his limbs felt incredibly heavy. His head was hot and achy and his chest congested. He fell asleep again, still lying crossways in the bed.

He woke from time to time, accepting a cool drink, warm broth and potions from Bill, who otherwise
left him alone. He thought he heard voices once when he awoke, but determined he must have been mistaken – Bill had promised to wake him when Snape returned. The next time he woke up it was dark, with only a pale band of moonlight lighting the room. He struggled to get up, kicking away sweaty sheets. He needed to use the loo. He didn't feel quite so dizzy and was able to make his way over to the door. When he opened it, he found, to his great surprise, that Snape was walking up the stairs carrying one of the oil lamps from the sitting room. He had a black robe thrown over his shoulder but was wearing the dark trousers and white shirt to which Harry had become accustomed of late. He looked both tired and distracted.

"Professor!" croaked Harry, his voice hoarse from illness, sleep and the battering his lungs had taken in the water and afterward.

Snape stopped two stairs from the top and held the light away from his face toward Harry. An odd look, passing from worry to relief and back to worry again, crossed his face. He walked up the remaining stairs and stopped a few feet away from Harry.

"How are you feeling? Mr. Weasley said you spent most of the day in bed—you have a virus?"

Harry steadied himself by leaning back against the doorframe. "Yeah, hurts to breathe. And I'm dizzy. Madam Pomfrey sent a potion." He let a relieved smile flit over his face. "You're back."

Snape ignored his last comment and patted his trouser pocket. "I have your next dose here, as well as the nerve regenerator. You missed your last dose. You are going somewhere?" He lifted an eyebrow. Harry almost smiled. Underneath the concern he was showing for Harry, it was the same old Snape.

"Just the loo," he said, taking the three steps necessary to get him across the corridor to the door of the loo. He grabbed the doorframe again to keep himself upright.

"Do you require assistance in there?"

Harry managed to look horrified as he closed the door behind him without replying. When he returned to his bedroom, feeling very shaky after the short trip across the corridor and back, Snape was there waiting. The professor had pulled the sweaty sheets off the bed and was changing them with a useful spell that set the new sheets unfolding and tucking in as he stood beside the bed, idly holding his wand. He twitched it one more time and the sheets folded back so that Harry could slide in. Harry actually fell in more than slid in, but the end result was the same. He was horizontal and no longer in danger of losing his balance and toppling over.

Snape looked at him and shook his head. He held out his hand to Harry. "Come, you'll need to be sitting up to take these potions." He steadied Harry with his hand while Harry scooted with difficulty into a sitting position. "Do you want me to change the bed back?" he asked.

"Back?" rasped Harry.

"To a regular mattress," explained Snape.

"No, I like it like this," answered Harry. "Keeps me cool."

Snape looked from Harry to the pile of sweaty sheets on the floor next to him.

"Can't help sweating," muttered Harry, taking the first potion that Snape held out. He scrunched his face up at the taste, but stoically took the second. Snape, meanwhile, had pressed his hand against Harry's forehead.

"I'll be back in a moment," he said, taking the empty vials from Harry and disappearing out the door.
Harry heard him open the door to his bedroom, then walk down the corridor again and downstairs. He was back within minutes with another potion and a glass of juice. As Harry took the juice from him after swallowing the potion, his eyes were drawn to Snape's shoulder. The black robes were gone.

"You're alright, then?" Harry couldn't help but ask. "You…took care of…business?"

Snape was silent for a moment. He finally sat down on the edge of the bed, turning sideways to face Harry.

"The Dark Lord is … upset. That you are not at Hogwarts. That is all you need to know."

"How does he know…?" Snape's pointed look stopped him before the question was fully formed. "Right. All I need to know."

"You are still perfectly safe here."

Harry scoffed, as much as he could given the state of his throat. Snape regarded him intently for a moment.

"Bill said you maintained your Occlumency shields on the beach an entire hour—after the attack." Harry noted that he had dropped the formal 'Mr. Weasley.' "Were you able to occlude the entire time? Did you see or feel anything from the Dark Lord?"

Harry had slipped back down and was lying semi-curled on his side, facing Snape. "It was really hard to behind my barrier," he said quietly. "Focusing on my heartbeat helped in the end—it's a lot like the sound I hear when I'm wrapped up in the bubble. And no—I didn't feel anything once I had my barrier in place. But…" Harry paused, coughed deeply several times and rolled over to his back. Snape was still sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the bed, regarding him closely.

"But…?" he prompted when Harry closed his eyes and didn't continue.

"I don't know," said Harry softly. "The attack was just different than the others last year. All I could feel was the pain. I couldn't feel any … any emotion behind it. Before…before I could always tell that he was angry, or really happy about something. This time it was just this sudden intense burning pain and pressure. And it didn't let up. It didn't really vary in intensity like it does when he's torturing someone…"

"I see," said Snape. His already drawn face had paled more. He swiveled so that both feet were back on the floor and he was facing the door. Harry rolled back over on his side and watched his professor's shoulders tense. He could see only a small part of Snape's face in profile, not much more than the sharp edge of his cheek and the end of his nose.

"What? What's wrong?" asked Harry.

"The pain—the burning pressure—as you describe it—you have never felt something like that through your scar before?"

"No. I mean, yes—I've felt pain—sometimes so bad it made me sick. But before there were always images attached to it." Harry stopped talking, coughed again and sighed. "Hurts. Feels like my throat's on fire," he said.

"I'll go get some water to leave next to your bed," said Snape, standing up. "It's after midnight—you should try to sleep."
"You never told me what's wrong," said Harry from his position in the middle of the bed just as Snape reached the door.

Snape turned. "I have a theory as to what made this episode different—but I need to give it more thought before discussing it with you. Right now I am going to get you something stronger for that cough. You'll rip your throat to shreds if you keep coughing like that, and I'm not likely to get a minute of sleep with all the noise."

"Alright," replied Harry. He yawned and closed his eyes. "But I want to know. I think it's important." He was nearly asleep when Snape came back with the water and another potion. He downed the potion without protest. "Tastes like dragon dung," he muttered.

"That good?" answered Snape. "I'll have to work on the formula."

He picked up the lamp from where he'd placed it on the bedside table and left the room without closing the door. Harry closed his eyes and fell immediately into slumber, never knowing that across the corridor, Snape left his own bedroom door purposefully open as well.
Chapters 23 - 44

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of Moment of Impact consisting of chapters 23-44. Moment of Impact is the first story in a five story arc featuring a mentor relationship between Harry Potter and Severus Snape. Despite being AU after OOTP, the story closely follows canon events.

Chapter Notes

This story was originally published as a WIP in chapters on fanfiction.net in late 2010 and is found in its entirety there under my alternate pen name, Suite Sambo.

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Chapter 23
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THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Harry spent the better part of the next day in bed. By mid-afternoon, he was bored enough to walk carefully downstairs. He peeked in the sitting room but didn't see Snape, so he walked through the kitchen out onto the sunny porch. Snape wasn't there either. Exhausted by the brief exercise, Harry sat down on one of the lounges and picked up the Grindelwald book from the table. The next chapter was titled "Expecting the Unexpected." Harry, remembering Snape's promise a couple days ago, smiled. He opened the book and began to read. He was amused to see the phrase "Constant Vigilance!" as Grindelwald admonished the reader to never let their guard down. Harry wondered if Moody, too, had learned Occlumency this way.

He dozed in fits and starts on the chair, in the hammock, and back in his bed until the sun set. Snape had poked his head out of the spare bedroom when Harry came up the stairs to use the loo after his nap in the hammock.

"You're looking a bit better," he said. "Are you hungry?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he said, clearing his throat. "Had some orange juice downstairs."

"Well, that will certainly fill you up," replied Snape, stepping back into the small room without further comment.

When Harry woke up next it was again dark outside. He was feeling significantly better. He rolled from his stomach to his side, looking out the bedroom window at the moonlit water. There was no clock in the room and he couldn't begin to guess the time—it could be late evening or the middle of the night. He listened carefully a moment but didn't hear Snape moving around upstairs. His stomach growled and he realized he was hungry.
He heard the voices as he began walking down the stairs. A soft flickering glow from the old oil lamps was coming from the sitting room, making the flames dance, distorted, on the corridor walls. He paused near the top of the stairs to see if he could make out who was talking. One voice was clearly Snape's. He thought he heard the words "Draco Malfoy" and "testing him" and he was sure Snape clearly said "Bella." His blood boiled, reminded in this way of Sirius' killer.

With immense difficulty and extreme force of will—as all his instincts told him to stop, sit down and listen—he continued walking down the stairs, making more noise than was absolutely necessary.

"Mr. Potter?" called Snape and by the time Harry reached the bottom, Snape had met him at the landing. Try as he might, Harry could not resist peeking into the sitting room, where the Headmaster, dressed in a deep purple robe with matching pointy hat, sat in the plush chair usually occupied by Snape. The chessboard was set up on the table in front of him.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," said Harry, pulling his head back around and looking at Snape, deliberately ignoring the headmaster. "I'm getting hungry—was just going to go make a sandwich."

Snape's gaze had dropped down to Harry's bare feet. He lifted his eyes and took in Harry's rumpled clothing and bed head hair.

"There is leftover shepherd's pie from dinner," he said. "Can you stomach something that heavy?"

Harry's stomach rumbled in reply. "That sounds good. I'll just leave you be, then." Not eavesdropping had been incredibly difficult. Not blurting out "Why is the Headmaster here? What's going on with Malfoy?" was more so.

Snape glanced back into the sitting room. Dumbledore was fiddling with his beard as he contemplated the chess board, a rook in his hand.

"I'm sure the Headmaster would like to have a few words with you before he leaves, now that you're awake. Take your dinner out to the porch—we'll join you in a few moments. I left a lamp burning on the table out there in case you came down."

True to his word, Snape and the Headmaster appeared within five minutes. Harry had had several bites of cold pie by then, and Snape cast a warming charm on it without Harry having to ask.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore," said Harry as the Headmaster settled himself into one of the chairs at the large wicker table. His voice was still raspy but it didn't hurt quite as much to talk as it had earlier in the day.

"Harry," replied the Headmaster quietly, in greeting. His blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses regarded Harry closely. Harry felt a bit like a bug under a magnifying glass. "It is good to see you up and about. You have had a rough time of it these past two days."

Harry began to shrug, realized as he did so that it was probably rude, and tried to turn the shrug into a stretch midway through.

"I'm feeling better," he said. "Tired of sleeping, though."

Snape was busy stacking books and parchment to make more room at the table. There was something a tiny bit off about him, but Harry couldn't put his finger on it.

"I imagine you are," said Dumbledore. "How is your Occlumency training progressing?" As he asked the question, he caught Harry's eyes.
"Expect the unexpected." No…

This was not the full frontal cavalry charge of an attack that Snape had led last year during Occlumency "lessons." It was much more insidious and, Harry knew instinctively, much more threatening. Dumbledore would sneak in instead, if he could, probing tendrils pushing against his brain lightly like caressing fingertips, wearing him down like the slow progress of a glacier scouring the earth. An almost memory rose up, of Remus' arms around him in the Department of Mysteries, holding him back as Sirius disappeared, but he managed to shake it off. Almost without a second thought, Harry was both retreating and flying. He couldn't have explained later how he did it, but he was floating and bobbing inside his protective womb, the thrum of a dully echoing heartbeat covering his very presence. But at the same time, a piece of his mind was soaring above the earth, making large looping laps over the Forbidden Forest on his Firebolt, his brain and body replete with unadulterated joy and nothing else. He could fly forever, he knew he could, laps and circles and figure eights…

"Harry? Harry?" A hand was shaking him by the shoulder and Harry opened his eyes. Snape dropped his hand and relaxed back into his chair. Harry looked at Professor Dumbledore, reorienting himself.

"That was sneaky," he stated without anger or accusation. It was a lot harder to be angry at your attacker when you were actually successful at keeping him out of your brain.

"He's a natural, Severus," said Dumbledore, sounding very well pleased. "After that first moment I simply couldn't find him. Had a lovely overhead view of the Forbidden Forest—one, mind you, that students who respect the fact that the Forbidden Forest is, in fact, Forbidden, should not have in their realm of experience."

"There is a problem, though," said Snape. "He is so effective at submerging himself in his womb world that he cannot pull himself from his occlusion without assistance."

"I thought that was just something we hadn't covered yet," said Harry, not liking that the two professors were talking about him as if he couldn't hear their every word.

Snape acknowledged his statement with a nod, but continued in the same vein. "So, he reacted both naturally and effectively to your attack. Yet yesterday he floundered, nearly drowned and then took at least five minutes to slip into an occluded state once I urged him to do so. What is different?"

"A lot," muttered Harry, ignoring the fact that Snape was actually addressing the Headmaster.

Snape shot him the glare. Unfortunately for him, it had lost most of its efficacy and Harry rolled his eyes.

"I think you are right, Severus," said Dumbledore, looking from Severus over to Harry. "Harry, this may come as a surprise to you but neither Professor Snape nor I believe that you were a deliberate target of Voldemort's anger yesterday, nor in fact an accidental one. Occluding ultimately separated you from the pain, so it was certainly not a wasted effort."

"I don't understand," said Harry. He glanced over at Snape, who had on his best poker face, and then at Dumbledore. "What happened to me yesterday then? Are you saying the pain wasn't even from Voldemort?"

"He was summoning his Death Eaters, Harry," answered the Headmaster. "That's what you were feeling, through your scar—the pain each of the Death Eaters feels through his or her Dark Mark each time Voldemort calls them to his side."
Harry's hand reflexively rose to touch the scar on his forehead. He was beginning to feel panicky.

"Are you saying I'm going to feel that every time he summons the Death Eaters?"

"Mr. Potter." Snape's quiet voice earned his immediate attention. "I would like you to reason this out. I have already given it significant thought since I returned here last night. You have never felt this kind of attack before, correct?"

"No, I haven’t," said Harry. "I told you that last night."

"I believe you told me it was different as there were no images to go along with the pain. You didn’t feel—or could not discern—the Dark Lord's emotional state."

Harry nodded. "But I still don’t understand," he said.

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged a glance. Dumbledore then leaned in toward Harry, his bent nose half in shadow. "Harry, Professor Snape believes—and I am inclined to agree with him—that you did not feel the pain directly from Voldemort himself yesterday. He feels that his summons somehow flowed or was passed to you. You felt it much more intensely than he did, and we have been theorizing why that might be."

"I never…" began Harry, looking at Snape. "I mean, I've never known before—when he was summoning the Death Eaters. Do you know when he's really angry?"

"Not unless I am in his presence," answered Snape calmly. "The summons varies in intensity, so I have some idea of the urgency of the call. But no, I do not feel any emotion through my…." He didn't actually say "my Dark Mark." Instead, he lifted his left arm, indicating the area between wrist and elbow, then let it fall rather heavily back to the table.

"This is bad, isn't it?" said Harry. "I don't mean for me—I mean for you. Could he somehow find out you're helping me?" Harry turned quickly back to Dumbledore, not waiting for an answer. "I have the basics of Occlumency down now, Headmaster. I can do this with someone else—or I can go back to the Dursleys for a couple weeks if everyone else is busy."

Harry did not miss the significant look the Headmaster gave Snape before responding.

"Well, I think that reaction pushes one of our theories forward, don't you Severus?"

Severus, after staring at the Headmaster for a very long moment, turned his gaze back to Harry and replied.

"We have somehow established a connection, Mr. Potter. We are living together under the Fidelius Charm—that is one explanation for this connection. You are also, in essence, apprenticing to me as you learn Occlumency. That is the second possible explanation. The third is more difficult to explain and is likely influenced by the first two scenarios. In short, you have learned to trust me and through the discovery of certain shared elements of our past, feel empathy for me that could not have been present before this summer. It is possible, even, that you have begun to transfer your feelings for your Godfather to me, perhaps unconsciously—and indeed inappropriately—seeking to fill the emotional void left by his death."

"What do you mean by inappropriately?" asked Harry. Snape's matter of fact, clinical tone bothered him. "And I'm not doing that anyway—but why would it be inappropriate?"

"I am not role model material, Harry," answered Snape dismissively. "Of all the possible role models available, I am the least likely candidate to step into his shoes."

"You trust Professor Snape, Harry? You respect him?" asked Dumbledore, cutting in and interrupting the fixed stares the other two were leveling at each other. "You would rather return to the Dursleys than risk him coming to harm because of this connection you've somehow forged?"

"I don't want anyone to get hurt because of me," Harry responded quickly. "I already told him—that even the Dursleys."

"The Dursleys are as likely targets as anyone else, after the publicity of your accident there," answered Dumbledore.

"Better them than…" Harry paused, caught.

Snape scoffed. "I am touched that I rank higher in your book than the cow and the walruses."

Harry smiled, but it was a pained sort of smile.

"Does it matter how it happened?" he asked. "If we do have this…this connection, don't we just have to figure out how to break it or block it and go back to how things used to be?"

"Harry." Professor Dumbledore's voice was low, imploring. "Answer me honestly, please. You want that? You want to go back to how things used to be between yourself and Severus?" The use of Snape's given name seemed to make him more human, to make this situation all the more poignant.

"No," Harry answered, then quickly continued. "But I will. I mean, I'll try. I've only really known him for a week, after all, haven't I? School will start again in a few weeks and I'll have my friends back and I won't need anyone…anyone to…" His voice had been rising and he choked on his words.

"Anyone to what, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"Anyone to take care of me," said Harry. He quickly added "Or to train me. We'll start up the D.A. again… I'll practice occluding every night. I can do it on my own—I always have before. I don't need…I don't need…" again he choked on his words. The sense of imminent loss surprising him with its intensity.

Dumbledore rose to his feet. He faced Snape.

"Severus, you will stay here. You two will work this out. Harry is not going back to the Dursleys, and he cannot come to the castle just yet." He did a strange, unexpected thing then. Harry was immensely touched by it, and ultimately confused. He walked over next to Harry and crouched down on aged knees until he was eye level with him. "I, too, lost nearly all that were dear to me once, Harry, and also at a young age. You do not understand now but perhaps someday you will. I am giving you Severus, because I cannot be for you now what you do need…an adult who can focus on you, who is more interested in you… than in the greater good."

He stood and Harry heard his knees crack. Harry's gaze was riveted on his hand, the same hand that had rested on Harry's knee as he knelt beside him, the hand that had been covered with a glove at their previous meetings this summer. The hand was shriveled, and blackened.

And he was gone, leaving Harry and Severus, a pile of books, a flickering oil lamp, and the elephant in the room.

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Chapter 24
"What happened to his hand?" asked Harry after a lengthy silence where he fiddled with his food and Snape remained seated at the table. "And what did he mean…who has he lost?"

"He was cursed," replied Snape, after a moment. He offered no other explanation and Harry didn't pry further. He had learned of late to accept the small morsels he was given and wait patiently for more crumbs to fall.

"As for your second question…even I do not know the details, and if I did, they would not be mine to reveal. Harry—" Harry looked up, meeting his professor's eyes. "Harry," he repeated, "the Headmaster has entrusted you with a great deal. It is not…his way…to lay it on the table so openly. I know it is not much—that you still have many questions—but it will have to be enough for now."

Harry nodded, suddenly realizing how tired he was becoming. Snape looked at him closely.

"As for the rest, a more extensive exploration of the potential connection between us and what it could mean for us in the future—I think that is a conversation best left for the morning, when we are both rested. I expect there is much you’d like to say, but your throat could use a respite. Is there anything more you feel you must say tonight? Anything you would like to ask?"

"Yeah, there is. Just one thing…"

"Go on, then," said Snape.

"Can he do that? Can he just give you to me?" He left unsaid—Do you belong to him somehow? What power does he have over you?

Snape stood up and rested his hands on the back of the chair he had just vacated. "Yes, he can." He didn't offer any more explanation, and Harry thought his voice sounded both resigned and grateful. He didn't understand, but didn't have the energy and mental clarity now to form the question he wanted to ask.

"For the greater good," he mused. "That's what he said in the book."

"It is," agreed Snape.

"Then what he's saying…is that he can't look at just me. He can't get past what is best for…for…"

"For humanity," answered Snape. "Don't feel singled out. You are not the only chessman on his board."

Harry shook his head. He let Dumbledore go for the time being and tried to wrap his mind around this connection that Snape and Dumbledore were concerned about. Honestly, he could use a little time to process everything. As he understood it now, the pain—somehow magnified—Snape felt when Voldemort called him had been passed on from Snape to Harry, hitting him while he was underwater, almost causing him to drown. There was a lot that wasn't clear however—was Harry somehow emotionally connected to Snape? Aware of him so intently that he felt Snape's pain? Did Snape feel his? He had had no inkling of what Snape was feeling once he had Disapparated. Did he need to be near him physically for this connection to open?

Snape eyed him critically. "It is nearly one in the morning now. Go back to bed—I'll clean up in
Harry nodded and stood up. "Thanks," he said, pausing by the kitchen door and turning back to face Snape. "Thanks for telling me what you think is going on—with this connection thing. It's nice to know for a change."

"What you are saying," corrected Snape, "is that it is nice to be trusted with the information."

"Yeah, that too," said Harry. As he left the room, he could hear Snape moving things around in the kitchen cabinets.

Harry had thought he'd lie awake, reworking the entire confusing evening in his head, trying to make sense of it all. But the gentle rocking motion of the cool waterbed once again lulled him to sleep. His dreams that night were filled with vague feelings of disquiet, of Dumbledore pulling off the glove, revealing a blackened hand that crumbled into dust, of Snape digging a moat around Shell Cottage, filling it with seawater and Death Eaters. He awoke on his own the next morning with the sun shining through the east-facing window, his dreams only hazy clouds of another day. He still felt a little weak as he got out of bed, but a hot shower and clean clothes went a long way to wake him up and make him feel more human again. He made his way downstairs. A plate with eggs, bacon and toast was sitting on the counter, still warm, next to a tall glass of orange juice. He picked both up, holding the glass against his body with his right hand for more support, and walked out onto the porch. Snape was in the hammock, one arm thrown over this forehead, eyes closed.

"I'm not asleep," he answered before Harry even thought of asking—or checking.

"Plate's for me, I guess?" asked Harry.

"Do you see any other lie-a-beds around here?" asked Snape.

"Only you," answered Harry.

"Cheeky," Snape muttered.

Harry ate in silence for a few minutes. He glanced at the clock. Nine thirty already.

"Get started on your summer work when you finish," Snape instructed.

"But I thought we'd be taking up where we left off last night." Had Snape changed his mind now that he'd had time to sleep on it?

"We're two days off schedule now," answered Snape, giving up on his pretense of sleeping in the hammock. "And unfortunately, I must spend part of the day at Hogwarts. I will be back again at dinnertime, and we will save our discussion for the evening when I return. I have left you a schedule for the day—do try to adhere to it as best possible." He nodded toward Harry's school books. A piece of parchment rested on top of the stack, weighted down with a smooth black stone Harry had picked up on the beach and brought back to the house.

Harry swallowed the piece of toast he was chewing and reached for the list.

"You can't be serious!" he exclaimed. "TWO naps? And what's this about cleaning up the beach?"

Snape shook his head. "Read what it says, Mr. Potter. Collect driftwood on the beach. It will be necessary for the good old fashioned beach campfire we will have down there this evening after I return. As for the naps, you are still recovering from your illness and injury—you will be thankful for the chance to sleep."
Harry was reading the schedule. He was intrigued by the evening's plans. While it sounded like fun—sitting on the beach drinking butterbeer in front of a fire—he knew by now that there would be an instructional purpose behind it as well, a reason to remove this particular discussion from the cottage to the beach, probably a reason for the fire too. He studied the schedule again. If he followed it to the T, he'd be journaling on trust again for thirty minutes, working on assignments, taking two thirty minute naps, reading the Grindelwald book, meditating, eating lunch, doing his physical therapy exercises and gathering driftwood. He looked up and groused "Don't I even get to go to the loo?"

"Certainly. You can cut your lunch short by a few minutes…or take a private moment or two while you're down at the beach gathering wood…"

Harry rolled his eyes, still looking at the parchment. "Wait, what's this? DADA summer assignment with RL? From one 'til three? We don't have any DADA summer work—Umbridge never assigned any."

Snape lifted an eyebrow. "No, she didn't. But you have some. I assigned it."

"You did? Just for me? Gee, thanks." Harry grinned.

"No, not just for you, though I can arrange extra work just for you if you're interested. I assigned the DADA homework for the entire school. The students received a special owl with the assignment since it was given after the term ended."

"So what's our assignment, Mr. Defense Against the Dark Arts … professor?" Harry had started the question in a fairly jovial, joking voice but as he got to the end of it, the words began to trail off.

"Wait a minute. You gave the assignment? Does that mean…?"

Snape regarded him evenly.

"Your question, Mr. Potter?"

Harry scowled. Snape was playing with him again. He knew what question Harry had implied.

"Does that mean you're teaching Defense this year?"

"It might," answered Snape. It was difficult for Harry to judge whether Snape was happy or sad about it. Rumor had it that he'd wanted the job for years. "Professor Dumbledore has not yet found an acceptable DADA professor, yet he hasn't found an acceptable replacement Potions instructor either. Suffice it to say things are up in the air still. And that information—sketchy as it is—is not to go out in any owls to your friends."

Harry ignored the comment about sharing the news with his friends. "Seems like they're always up in the air when it comes to the DADA position," muttered Harry. "Look what we got last year. I almost think people would be relieved to see you in that classroom after Umbitch…I mean Umbridge…"

Snape eyed Harry carefully. "I'm fairly sure there was an insult for me in there somewhere."

Harry rolled his eyes and studied the schedule again "So Remus is coming today to help me with the DADA summer assignment? What is our assignment anyway?"

"Wards," answered Snape shortly. "Sixth years will research simple privacy and intruder alert wards. However…I have asked Lupin to work on something different with you today. He taught you the Patronus spell, yes?"
Harry nodded. "Third year," he answered. "The dementors." He shuddered at the memory. Remus Lupin had shown an inordinate amount of patience with him while he learned the very difficult spell, the spell that had ultimately saved his life.

"Today he will be teaching you how to deliver a verbal message with your Partronus," said Snape. "This is how Order members communicate with each other." He didn't seem inclined to say more—more distracted this morning than he'd been the night before, and less inclined to share nonessential information. When he went out the front door to Apparate beyond the wards an hour later, Harry was already in the front garden looking for plant-eating insects to sketch and categorize for his Herbology assignment. Snape walked over near where Harry was picking through flower stalks.

"Harry," he began. Over the last few days, Harry noted that Snape had begun to call him Harry almost as frequently as he called him Mr. Potter.

"I know, I know. I'll stay inside, won't touch anything, won't break anything, won't make any messes, won't eat anything out of the fridge, won't light anything on fire, won't do anything freakish...."

"Dursley rules?" said Snape.

Harry nodded and kept searching for insects.

"Very amusing. Actually, I wanted to tell you to stay inside the wards—more specifically, inside this fence in the front, and in the back down to the ocean, but only directly behind the cottage. Don't wander further looking for driftwood—or..." He looked at the rather large lady bug Harry had picked up "...insects. And if anything should happen, you can Floo-call Hogwarts. The Floo here is keyed directly to my quarters in the dungeon. There is a house elf on watch there at all times—a miserably upbeat creature called Dobby. Seems to have a fondness for you. He will fetch someone immediately if there is a problem."

Harry nodded his understanding and watched Snape as he opened the gate, walked out a few steps and disappeared with a short, sharp crack. Harry stared at the empty spot for several minutes, then returned to the flower bed where a fat beetle was walking clumsily up the stem of a brown-eyed Susan. The beetle only vaguely resembled Rita Skeeter's Animagus form, but it gave Harry a very good idea for that DADA assignment on wards.

Could wards be set to trip when a human in Animagus form crossed them? A few minutes later, Harry was in the sitting room on the floor in front of the bookshelf, holding a dusty and dog-eared copy of "Animagi Among Us: A Beginner's Guide to Finding the Animal Inside."

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Chapter 25

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FIRE & ICE

Harry was sleeping when Snape returned that evening. He'd done his exercises after Remus left and had then spent an hour gathering a big pile of driftwood. Snape had claimed he wasn't "cleaning up" the beach, but he'd found a deflated beach ball, a pair of women's pants that looked like they would fit Uncle Vernon, an old life vest, a small rhinestone-studded dog collar with a name tag reading "Miss Priscilla" and an empty bottle of Uncle Sylvester's Hair Replacement Formula for Folliclely Challenged Gentlemen. He'd done most of the lifting and dragging with his left arm and had a
handful of splinters for his trouble. He'd fallen asleep on the hammock after coming back from the beach, and had slept right through meditation and the time slated to read the Grindelwald book. The Animagus book was still upstairs in his bedside table drawer.

He stretched in the hammock and opened his eyes. It was still light outside, though the sun had begun to set and the glow from the west over the cottage rooftop dropped pinkish hues on the water.

"I was about to wake you," came Snape's voice from the kitchen. How did he do that? wondered Harry. "We'll be cooking our supper in the fire tonight. Come here and wrap up the corn and potatoes and I'll go get the fire going."

Harry glanced at the clock on the porch. Nearly seven—he'd slept almost two hours. Perhaps conjuring his Patronus a half dozen times had tired him out—though he didn't think that filling his mind with the dream image of dropping off the Astronomy Tower on the thestral with Luna would wipe him out so thoroughly. He made his way into the kitchen to find Snape rummaging through a corner cabinet. "Wash them first, then wrap them in the foil. Add a pat of butter to each package." Snape had pulled out a rather dangerous looking oversized fork and an enormous pair of tongs and dropped them on the counter, leaving the room again without additional comment.

An hour later they were sitting on beach chairs beside a fire that had been banked to glowing embers. Snape was using the tongs to dig out the foil-wrapped packets and Harry was balancing a stick with several fat sausages on it above the coals. The moon has climbed a bit in the sky—it was waxing toward full—and the glow over the beach softened the otherwise sharp shadows of the scrubby plants and grasses growing on the edge of the sand.

"I never ate by a campfire before," said Harry a bit later as he dropped a sausage onto the open foil of a potato packet. He'd taken a bite and nearly burned his tongue on the hot grease.

"It can be quite pleasant if it's not necessary," said Snape obliquely. Harry puzzled at the statement and decided that Snape was saying that having no choice but to cook your food on a campfire and eat in the open was not enjoyable. He imagined Snape on the run, or lost out in the Forbidden Forest, or on some sort of primitive camping trip with a group of Muggle Boy Scouts.

"S good," he said around a mouthful of potato. He was sitting with his legs crossed, still in the chair, facing the fire, facing the ocean. Snape sat beside him at an angle and was somehow managing to eat his fire-cooked dinner without getting nearly as messy as Harry was. Harry finished eating, balled up his foil wrapping and tossed it into the fire. He sat and watched Snape for a few minutes. The man was eating his corn one-handed, seeming to chew thoughtfully between bites. He finished, tossed the cob into the fire, then turned and addressed Harry, diving right into 'the discussion' without warning or preamble.

"Not so long ago—only a few months ago, in fact—you and five of your friends snuck off into the Forbidden Forest, located a herd of thestrals and directed them to take you to the Ministry of Magic in London. If I am not mistaken, several of these friends couldn't even see the beasts that were carrying them….carrying them for hundreds of kilometers, I might add."

Harry didn't particularly like how this 'discussion' was starting out, but knowing there was nothing for it, he nodded, biting his bottom lip. Interestingly, Snape seemed to be expanding on the very topic Remus had discussed with him here at the beach earlier in the day. (missing chap?)

Snape stared at him, very hard, a moment. "This conversation is going to be about trust, Harry," he said more softly, the sharp, disbelieving near-anger now gone from his voice. "It is necessary that I understand some things before we go forward."
"If you say so," said Harry, his voice low as well. He watched as Snape stirred the embers with a long stick then placed several more large pieces of wood on the fire, inviting the suppressed flames to come back. "What do you want to know?"

"Had you ever ridden a thestral before, Harry? Had any of you?"

Harry shook his head.

"Had you ever known anyone else to have ridden one? Did you even know for sure that they could be ridden?"

Again, Harry shook his head. In the heat of the moment, it had seemed obvious—their only alternative. Now, he could see how ridiculous it appeared.

"What made you think a thestral had the ability to understand you? To listen to your directions and take you where you wanted to go?"

Harry shrugged. He had absolutely no idea. It had just seemed right, somehow.

Severus spoke slowly and clearly. "Yet, inside the castle were a number of individuals—adults—that you might have trusted, correct? Some, indeed, that you did trust?"

"I tried telling you," Harry retorted. "You were my last hope."

"By the time you tried telling me anything," said Snape with the barest hint of resignation in his voice, "it was too late. And you told me not because I was your last hope, but your only hope. By that time, you'd gotten caught in Umbridge's trap. Of course I knew what you meant, and I acted immediately. But you had no real reason to trust me, did you? I had worked quite hard to be sure that you did not, in fact."

"I trust you now," said Harry. "I… I've been trying, you know? To not ask nosy and impertinent questions. To not… eavesdrop. To not… worry … about what's happened to Dumbledore's hand, or what's happening at Hogwarts with the Ministry and the Unspeakables."

"I realize that," said Snape, his eyes connecting with Harry's, acknowledging that he had noticed and for some reason that simple acknowledgement struck Harry deeply. "But still, I would like you to explain to me why you put your trust in a beast—magical or not—and not in one of your professors? And I am talking about going to a long-term member of the faculty instead of sneaking into Umbridge's office to Floo call Grimmauld Place."

"It's not that I trusted the thestrals..." began Harry.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No?"

"No. It was more like… like instinct."

Snape looked slightly smug at this revelation. Harry didn't understand why.

"You are saying, then, that you trusted your own instinct?"

"Yeah. Why not? I've always had …" He saw the trap too late. "I mean I never…"

Snape inexplicably rescued him.

"For many years, I have believed you to be impetuous and arrogant, flaunting authority, disregarding rules. As a first year, you decided to protect the Sorcerer's Stone and battled a troll. As a second year,
you entered the Chamber of Secrets and confronted a basilisk. During your third year, you faced a werewolf and an escaped suspected murderer. Need I go on?"

Harry shook his head. It was embarrassing, put out on the table like that. "He wasn't a murderer."

"I now sit here and ask myself why," continued Snape. "Why have you gotten into these situations every year? It is actually quite simple. You trust no one but yourself. Oh—you may trust your friends—I will give you that, but I am sure you do not listen to them when they voice concerns, as Ms. Granger most certainly must have done on more than one occasion."

Harry swallowed. Snape was right – and look where this misplaced trust had gotten him at the Department of Mysteries.

"Harry, I am not saying that this kind of trust is totally misplaced." Harry looked uncertain, and Snape continued. "So I ask myself again—why does this child trust no one? Why is he so wary of adults? Why does he rush in where angels fear to tread?"

Harry poked his stick into the fire in front of him; the wood settled and the coals crackled. He didn't comment, not even on Snape's use of the word 'child' to describe him.

"Would you like me to answer those questions—or would you prefer to?" asked Snape.

Harry looked over at Snape and shrugged half-heartedly. "Go ahead," he said, resigned.

"You don't trust because you have never been given a reason to trust," answered Snape, as if the whole thing was crystal clear. "And while I place the majority of the blame for this squarely at your aunt's hoofs, the responsibility extends to every adult who has kept information from you that might ultimately have helped you, that has made deplorable decisions on your behalf or that have affected you. You learned early not to trust and when you came to Hogwarts, you were presented with one dangerous situation after another because the adults entrusted to teach you and guide you were often inept, moronic or blatantly evil. Adults have consistently let you down, Harry, so you trust only yourself." He paused and regarded Harry a moment. Harry felt his gaze and poked the fire again.

"This hasn't been much of a conversation about trust, has it?" asked Snape with a wry smile.

"More like a monologue," answered Harry.

"You are free to speak at any time," answered Snape. "Speak up. Deny what I am saying. Rail at me if you'd like."

"No need to," answered Harry. "I ... I remember Professor McGonagall talking to me about getting all those detentions with Umbridge." Snape raised an eyebrow at the mention of those particular detentions. "She told me to use my common sense—to think about who Umbridge was and who she was reporting to. And then she told me that as my teacher Umbridge had every right to give me detentions." He looked up at Snape. "I guess she must have regretted saying that, especially after what happened to her. Still...what with Dumbledore not even looking at me and Hagrid gone half the year..."

"Harry," interrupted Snape. "A few moments ago you said that you trust me. Now I will return the favor, so to speak, and trust you with some important information. This next year, at Hogwarts, I...I will be watched...closely. Both myself and Professor Dumbledore believe it is imperative that I continue my current operations, Harry, I cannot treat you any differently at Hogwarts than I have in the past. The Headmaster may have given me to you, but you are going to have to view this as temporary, a loan so to speak. Once we are back at Hogwarts, you will need to rely on others, to
learn to trust others as you apparently have learned to trust me. Despite the difficult circumstances, we cannot have you...I cannot have you...regress in this. It will be important in the end."

Harry had listened to Snape, his stomach sinking, a warm heart suddenly turned to ice. Not really knowing where he was going, he began to speak.

"Last night we talked about this connection between us that we had to explore further—to understand. Last night I wanted to break it, to make sure nothing happened to you because of it. And Dumbledore—Dumbledore said no—he said that wasn't really what I wanted. And he left you here with me. To take care of me, I guess." He began poking aggressively at the fire with the stick.

"What you just told me—it means that when we get back to Hogwarts I'm Harry bloody Potter again. You'll treat me the same as always and take points from me when Malfoy lobs stuff in my potions and give me detentions on Quidditch Saturdays if we're playing Slytherin." He gave a forced laugh. Snape remained silent as he went on. "And you'll make fun of the Weasleys and not acknowledge Hermione's brilliance—she's brilliant at Potions you know—and in general treat the Gryffindors like the dirt on the bottom of your boot."

He looked up at Snape to read his face, but Snape's face, as always, was inscrutable. He continued.

"And every time he calls you...I might know. I might feel it like burning ice."

"We will work on that," said Snape.

"I don't remember signing up for this," said Harry. None of this should surprise him—he wouldn't have been caught by surprise like this if he'd just been thinking, if he'd just kept up his guard. But anger was fighting with acceptance and coming out on top.

"This?" questioned Snape.

"Yeah, this." He pushed back his overlong fringe. "This scar. This life! This summer!"

Snape carefully, deliberately rolled back the left sleeve of his white button-down shirt. Harry saw him study the ugly brand on his forearm.

"And that is where we are different, you and me," said Snape. "I clearly remember signing up for this."

Harry was instantly sobered. Emotion welled up inside him to replace the anger that had been overwhelming him.

"Why did you?" he asked suddenly. He indicated Snape's forearm.

"Why do you ride thestrals?" answered Snape.

"It's not the same," said Harry quickly.

"Oh, but in a way, it is," retorted Snape.

Harry stared at the ground, thinking. "We were desperate," he said at last. "I didn't trust anyone to help me find another way. I didn't think there was another way. I didn't think about the consequences." He paused and looked up at Snape. They had matching sad half-smiles.

"Next year—back at Hogwarts," continued Harry, changing the subject. The icy lump that was his heart began to melt a little bit. "It won't be the same as it was before. It won't be the same because I'll
He felt stronger inside. More sure. And he still had two weeks here at Shell Cottage. A lot could happen in two weeks.

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Chapter 26

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ANIMAGI, WARDS AND TESTS

The next three days were spent rigorously following a demanding schedule with Snape. The morning after the beach fire, Harry had come down to find Snape working on the schedule at the porch table. It was later than he usually came down—he’d remembered the Animagus book in his side table after showering and had sat down on his bed to read the first chapter, which introduced Animagus forms in broad categories of animals. Harry had been immediately drawn to the birds. The idea of free-flying appealed to him greatly and he’d readily gotten lost in imagining being able to transform into a bird. Now, Harry looked over Snape's shoulder, munching on cold toast.

"Wow. If that's for me I'd better get started now."

"It's for both of us," replied Snape. "I want to recover some of the time we've lost so we can move on."

"Move on?" asked Harry. "Move on to what?"

"To what comes next," answered Snape cryptically. He looked up at Harry. "Potion ingredient preparation, in-depth study of the Goblin Wars, remedial Divination…that sort of thing." One side of his mouth lifted up but he continued to work on the complicated schedule. "But first—you will need to finish your summer assignments and read the rest of the Grindelwald book. I also need to spend time thoroughly testing your Occlumency shields. Furthermore, we have not yet completed a study of the symbolic elements in your drug-induced sea dream—particularly the last portion just before you awoke. Finally, I will need to understand precisely why you have a book on Animagus transformations in your bedroom."

Harry had taken his place at the table as Snape worked and talked. He was taking a drink of tea when Snape mentioned the Animagus book. He choked and coughed as Snape waited patiently, still making notes on the schedule and seemingly not paying any attention at all to Harry.

"I…uh, was wondering about wards," Harry answered. "And why did you look in my drawer?"

"Because you are a teenager—and because I noticed a book missing from the shelf. Now do go on." He put down his quill and leaned back in his chair.

For some reason, our DADA assignment is about wards, and when I was out front yesterday morning working on my Herbology assignment, I found a beetle. And that reminded me of Rita Skeeter—know she's an unregistered Animagus, don’t you?"

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"No, really! Hermione had her in a jar and made her swear not to publish any tripe or she'd turn her in. That was after all that stuff about me during the Triwizard Tournament got out."
"You're serious."

Harry nodded. "Really."

"And since the beetle reminded you of this…person…I can assume her animagus form is in fact a beetle?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah. Hermione would have had a hard time putting her in a jar if she were a billy goat or a crocodile or something."

Snape gave him the level stare, but his mouth twitched just enough for Harry to notice. "And did you ever—even once—consider taking this trapped beetle to…hmmmm…your Head of House? Who happens to be a member of the Order of the Phoenix and a registered Animagus?"

Harry grinned again. "You can't pin that one on me this time, sir. Hermione caught her—while I was in the infirmary at the end of fourth year. She showed us the jar on the Hogwarts Express on the way back to London."

Snape was shaking his head. "Perhaps Ms. Granger has less common sense than I thought. All right. I'll let the matter of the unregistered Animagus prowling around the halls of Hogwarts go….for now. But I'm still trying to piece together how the book in your drawer relates to your DADA assignment on wards."

"I'm getting there. You keep interrupting," replied Harry.

Snape waved his hand for Harry to continue.

"Anyway, I saw the beetle on the flowers and thought about Skeeter. It made me wonder if wards could be set to recognize a wizard or witch in their Animagus form. If we had had wards like that when Ron had Pettigrew in our dorm room all those years…." He trailed off, thinking, of course, about Sirius, rotting away in Azkaban while Peter got fat as Ron's pet.

Snape was studying Harry.

"What?" asked Harry. "Is it stupid? Impossible? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It is neither stupid nor impossible, Mr. Potter. A ward is something that at the core guards or protects. Magical wards can be incredibly simple or unbelievably complex. A simple ward might notify you if someone sets foot in your bedroom while a more complex ward would prevent anyone from entering in the first place. An even more complicated ward would allow some to enter and would prevent others from doing so. Categorizing the cans and can'ts adds yet another level of complexity. You can ward an item so that it can't be removed from a certain location or that it can be removed but only by a certain person or a certain type of person. Mr. Potter, you should be taking notes." Harry had been listening to Snape talk, fascinated. He didn't seem to hear his professor's comment about taking notes.

"The Philosopher's Stone was warded like that. That must have been a ridiculously complex spell—to judge a person's intent."

"It was."

"So, that's why I have the book," said Harry. "I wanted to learn more about Animaguses…” He grinned. “That doesn't sound right."

"Animagi," provided Snape.
"Right, Animagi," repeated Harry.

"And for that you need a book entitled 'Animagi Among Us: A Beginner's Guide to Finding the Animal Inside?' Don't you think a book such as 'All About Animagi' might have better met your needs?"

Harry reddened. "It sounded interesting."

"It is interesting. But it is not casual reading for underage wizards. I will ask this question even though I fear I already know the answer—are you interested in studying to be an Animagus?"

"Listen, I know this isn't the time to do it. I know the argument—I have too much on my plate already, for one. I should get proficient at Occlumency first."

"You must study with a registered Animagus. You must actually register to even study the art form. Animagus transformation is riddled with dangers and difficulties. There are a number of risks including not being able to transform back, going 'native' and being severely injured or killed while in the animal form."

Harry held up his hands. "Alright. I get it. I'll give the book back."

Snape stared at him expectantly.

"Now?"

Snape nodded, the barest hint of a nod.

Harry sighed but went to get the book. When he handed it over to Snape, Snape handed him a much thinner, less intriguing book predictably called 'All About Animagi.'

"Try this for extra-curricular reading. It is actually much better than the rather unimaginative title would suggest. If you are truly interested in pursuing this, speak with Professor McGonagall. She typically takes one or two student apprentices a year—usually seventh years, but occasionally a talented sixth former. And now that we have wasted another fifteen minutes, let us move on to something productive."

That statement launched nearly three days of intensive work that left Harry weary both in mind and body. Snape had Legilimized him from every angle and in every possible situation, even when he was fast asleep. Harry learned that eye contact only made the Legilimency easier—it wasn't a requirement for "brain rape" as he crudely began to call it. This was proven on the first evening when he was relaxing in the bath tub, minding his own business, when a lovely image of Ginny Weasley, hugging him and comforting him back at Hogwarts right after his accident rose in his head. That image was closely followed by one of him kissing Cho Chang last year and that one was followed by various Gryffindor girls... "Hey! Can't a guy have some privacy?" he wailed as he hastily Occluded, making a mental note to reexamine the Ginny Weasley memory-image again soon.

On the second afternoon, after Harry had finished the Grindelwald book, Snape had given him a two-hour long oral quiz. It consisted of open-ended questions such as "In chapter five, the author suggests pairing two barrier elements together—such as fire and rock—under certain conditions for certain Occlumens. Describe these conditions." Or "In the last chapter, the author states that a natural Occlumens is always occluding and that this natural state has certain benefits and risks. Discuss." Harry was exhausted after the two grueling hours, but Snape seemed pleased enough. "Pleased enough" for Snape, of course, meant "Passably done, Mr. Potter" and "Decent retention of the material" not "Excellent job. You've a quick mind and a sharp intellect."
They'd spent two more sessions in the ocean, Harry sticking a bit closer to the shore this time around. Then Snape tested Harry on erecting his barriers in a variety of locations—on a blanket at the seaside, the hammock on the porch, the sitting room sofa, his waterbed in his bedroom, sitting on the front stairs of the cottage. After he was satisfied that Harry did not actually have to be in the ocean or at the ocean side for success—Harry wisely did not point out that Dumbledore's stealth attack already proved that—they began working on triggers to help Harry pull out of his occluded state. Up to this point, during all of the practice sessions, Harry had remained occluded until Snape physically touched him and called his name. Once, as a test, Snape had left him occluded for two hours at the porch table. Harry had eventually fallen asleep and his head fell forward and hit the table, waking him.

"It will require a splitting of consciousness," explained Snape. "You will still retreat inside your barrier space with all that is important to protect, but you must leave half an eye open, so to speak, so that your conscious self can perceive that the intrusive attack has ended and release you from your protected zone."

"Riiiiight," said Harry.

Snape sighed. "You have chosen a very effective barrier, so effective that you lose yourself in it. Fortunately, our goal is to protect you from attacks by a vicious Dark Lord, not from fellow Gryffindors trying to get information about your latest amorous tryst. It wouldn't do for you to fall into a trance in the middle of breakfast because Mr. Thomas wanted details of your date the night before that you were unwilling to provide." Harry obligingly rolled his eyes. As if. Dean got way more action than Harry. Thinking of Dean with Ginny, though, caused a spike of jealousy to flare up.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry snapped back to the present. "Right. Half an eye open. So what does that mean in my Occlumency terms? I've been trying for the shielded, half-formed infant mind... Hey," he protested as Snape opened his mouth. "Stop that! I know what you're thinking!" He picked up a wadded up piece of parchment and lobbed it over at Snape, hitting him squarely on the nose. The parchment wad bounced and landed in Snape's tea with a splash.

Harry froze.

Snape stared at his tea and then at Harry. He rubbed his nose. He then reached into his tea and extracted the sodden parchment ball, leaned across the table and pressed it against Harry's face where it stuck to his cheek, dripping tea dribbles down his chin.

"That's for your cheek," he said without further comment. The parchment ball fell off of Harry's face onto the table. Snape ignored it.

And so it went on. By the end of the exercise Harry had managed to implement a visual trigger to end the shielding. It was almost like Snape said—with a small part of his brain focusing on what was actually in front of him, he was able to rouse himself from behind his barrier when Snape simply waved a hand at him. The most difficult part of the entire exercise was learning to keep his eyes open while he occluded.

"That will have to do for now," said Snape. They had made sandwiches for dinner and eaten them with crisps right out of the bag. Harry hadn't even had to cut the fruit up—Snape had tossed him a washed apple and he had eaten it in bites. "We have a long day tomorrow. You will need to pack two changes of clothes—we will be taking a short holiday. The Headmaster has suggested a brief excursion to London, but has requested that we go incognito, so to speak. And practically speaking,
there is no better place to be incognito—disguised or not—than in London." He pulled a Muggle
guidebook from his pocket and set it on the table in front of Harry. Harry picked it up, stared at it for
a moment, then stared back at Snape.

"We're going on holiday? Together?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter. And I have very high expectations for this trip as I haven't had a proper holiday in
some time."

Harry nodded. He wanted to say that he hadn't had one in some time either, but to be perfectly
honest, he hadn't ever had one. He was finally going on holiday. With Snape. Ron was going to
have kittens.

Chapter 27

LONDON

The next morning, Harry was in the kitchen by eight o’clock. buttering toast and adding a thick layer
of jam to each piece. Snape was puttering around upstairs (though Harry was relatively certain that
Snape would not take too well to being accused of puttering). He’d come in to Harry’s room fifteen
minutes ago and had tossed Harry a new backpack—surprisingly, it wasn't totally black—for his
clothes for the trip.

Harry was finishing off his third piece of toast when Snape appeared. He was dressed in black jeans
and a green short-sleeve button-down. Harry, who had never seen Snape wearing a color other than
black or white (and one could argue whether black and white were actually colors…), stared at him
as he dropped a bundle on the kitchen table, poured himself some tea and picked up a piece of toast.
He eyed the jam level disapprovingly and used a knife to scrape half of it off into the garbage bin.

"I did mention that we are going incognito, didn't I?" asked Snape, pulling the bundle he'd just
dropped onto the table over toward himself.

"Yeah," said Harry, hiding a grin as he once again eyed Snape's green shirt. "You said something
about that."

"We will be gone too long for Polyjuice potion to be practical—so we'll be resorting to a more
conventional means of disguise. The intent is to make us blend in with the rest of the tourists."

"So we need a camera," said Harry. "And a map."

"Those are props," said Snape. "They won't hide your appearance. And yes, I have both of those
items, as well as an obnoxiously large pair of binoculars and a plastic bag of bread crumbs to feed
those infernal swans in Kensington Gardens." He took out his wand and faced Harry. "Hair first.
Longer or shorter?"

Fifteen minutes later, Harry stood looking at himself in the mirror in the foyer at the base of the stairs.
Subtle changes, Snape had said. Brown hair, slightly longer. Round glasses transfigured into
rectangular, slightly tinted to mask the green in his eyes. An earring in his left ear—that had been his
idea. His signature floppy trainers were gone as well, replaced with a pair of boots of soft brown
leather. Those had been in the bundle on the table and fit perfectly. Harry wondered at that but didn't
question the apparent good luck. The boot's heels gave him some additional height as well.
Snape tossed him a tan jacket with the Wimbledon football club's logo on the back.

Five minutes later Harry took hold of Snape's arm as they stood facing the gravel road in front of Shell Cottage and a few moments after that, following the still-disturbing squeeze of Apparition, the two stood on Platform 9 ¾ of King's Cross Station. The platform, like the tracks it fronted, was empty. Harry dropped his hand off Snape's arm, feeling like he'd just been pushed through a sausage extruder.

"Maybe that's why I prefer thestrals," he said.

"You get used to it," commented Snape dryly.

They passed quickly through the barrier, through the always-crowded station where hundreds of Muggles stood in front of the big board waiting for their train's platform assignment (Harry glanced at it and noted that 9 ¾ didn't appear anywhere), out the street doors and then down a short escalator. Snape produced a roll of Muggle money and stood in queue at the ticket machines.

They were at the tail end of peak hours but the trains were still crowded. Harry followed Snape, noting that Snape didn't even look at the maps and barely glanced at the line signs, maneuvering his way through the tunnels with both speed and confidence, deftly avoiding the tourists who insisted on walking on the right instead of the left. When they surfaced fifteen minutes later at Charing Cross Road, Harry recognized the exit and knew they were fairly close to the Leaky Cauldron. Snape, however, headed in the opposite direction, turning down a small side street then into a pub and up a set of stairs leading from the building’s foyer.

Harry followed, more and more curious about where they were going on this supposed "holiday." They climbed up two flights to a landing with two doors. Snape stood in front of the one marked 200, touched the doorknob and muttered something Harry could not hear. The door opened.

"Come on, Miles," said Snape.

"Coming, Uncle Millard," answered Harry. When Snape had stuck him with the unappealing name "Miles" (kids named Miles were always getting beaten up in primary) and said that he himself would be known as "Steven," Harry had rebelled and had decided instead on the moniker Millard for Snape. They would be posing as Uncle and nephew, with "Miles" being the son of "Millard's" sister "Iris."

"What is this place?" asked Harry when they were both inside and the door was closed. It was obvious they were in a cozy and comfortable flat, and that wizards were accustomed to using it. The signs were everywhere if you knew where to look—pot of Floo powder on the mantle, a set of robes hung on the coat rack just inside the door, an empty owl roost sitting on a table near the windows, a copy of The Daily Prophet on the mantel. Harry glanced at the paper. It was dated July 24th of this year. The headline read "Unspeakables Silent on Department of Mysteries Debacle."

"Professor Dumbledore maintains this flat for when he has extended business in London at the Ministry. Order members make use of it frequently when on assignment. We will be using this location as our base while we explore London. Choose a bedroom and leave your backpack."

Harry headed down the short hallway and opened the first door on his right. It was a small bedroom—but perfectly adequate—so he tossed his backpack on the chair beside the bed. The bed, though messily made, looked very soft and he flopped down on it, grabbing a pillow as he bounced. As his hand slid under the pillow, he felt something lacy and pulled out a handful of….

He was off the bed like lightning, grabbing his backpack and hurrying out into the small living room.
where Snape was sitting at the desk, paging through a London guidebook.

"WHO did you say was using this place?" he asked, holding up a sheer black very slinky garment with spaghetti straps. Tiny red bows lined the outside of the generous cups.

Snape looked over at him distractedly. He stared at Harry a long moment. Harry suddenly realized he was holding the garment at chest-level. He hurriedly balled it up in one hand.

"Hmmm…I believe Professor McGonagall was the last one here," Snape replied, then returned to the book.

Harry was torn between laughing and throwing the thing down in horror. "Fine, I'll put it back where I got it…in YOUR room," he said. "You might want to do a Scourgify on those sheets before you turn in tonight."

What followed was one of the most enjoyable days Harry had ever had outside of Hogwarts. They visited the British Museum, had lunch amid the ducks and swans in Hyde Park (Snape must have secretly erected some sort of waterfowl barrier around himself as not a single bird got within three feet of him), saw Buckingham Palace and Big Ben and then spent the rest of the afternoon in Westminster Abbey. They ate dinner on the way back at a tiny Indian restaurant near the flat. Harry decided that he could eat garlic-flavored Naan bread forever. It certainly helped quell the fire from the Vindaloo Snape ordered for him.

"We'll be taking a boat over to Greenwich and visiting the National Maritime Museum tomorrow," Snape told him as, back at the flat, Harry pulled off his boots and rubbed his sore feet. "The Tower of London is on the way back—we can get off the boat there and see that and the Tower Bridge."

"That sounds good," said Harry. "Does it involve walking?" Not only were his feet sore but his knees and legs ached as well.

"Quite a bit," answered Snape. He went into the kitchen and rummaged through a cabinet, returning with a large jar full of a white cream. "Try this on your feet."

Harry dipped his fingers in and spread the potion on his soles. The soreness vanished almost instantly. He scooped out more and rubbed it in to cover the entire surface of both feet.

"Wow. This is great stuff. What is it?" He replaced the lid, squinting at the handwriting on the label. "Post-Cruciatus. "Oh. Wow."

"He put the jar down, sobered. Why did Snape keep a potion at the flat to help recover from the Cruciatius Curse?"

"It is effective for all types of muscle and joint stresses," said Snape, "and has a mild nerve regenerative as well. Soothes mild burns, gets rid of psoriasis and increases the user's IQ."

"Really?" quipped Harry. "You mean it doesn't remove freckles and cure hangovers?"

"Be grateful it is here. You have a bit more than an hour before bedtime—time enough for journaling and meditation. Your legs had quite a work-out today so just do your arm exercises before bed."

Harry was only too happy to fall into bed less than an hour later. Images from his day exploring the city with Snape filled his mind—from Snape explaining the Rosetta Stone to him to the ease at which he navigated the Tube to his inability to hide his fascination with Poet's Corner inside Westminster Abbey. The last image he had as he dropped off into a dreamless sleep was of Snape trying to ignore a very raucous swan demanding bread crumbs from exactly three feet away while they ate lunch. Unfortunately, the dreamless sleep did not last long.
The pain this time was more gradual, building from a mild ache to a slow, steady burn. Harry woke up gripping his head but it took him a moment to recognize the pain for what it was. In the three intensive days at the cottage before they came to London, Harry had finished all his summer work, completed the Grindelwald book, learned to occlude in almost any location and succeeded in developing a visual trigger to pull himself from occlusion. But he and Snape had not yet resolved anything regarding their connection. Now, with the ache and burn starting to feel like a migraine out of control, Harry stumbled out of bed and opened the bedroom door. The flat was dark, but he heard movement in the other bedroom. The door flew open as he stared at it.

"What are you doing? Occlude!" hissed Snape. He was wearing floor-length black robes, more formal than the teaching robes he typically wore, and held something in his hand that looked like more fabric.

Harry took several steps backward into the room. The pressure and burn in his scar was increasing steadily. He squinted against it.

"But he's not…"

"There is always the chance he will use the link. He cannot know I am with you!" hissed Snape. "Do NOT leave this flat for any reason. Occlude now! Inside your barrier…I will return when I can."

Harry dropped onto the bed and quickly rolled onto his side. He heard Snape fumbling with something on the night stand and then he was gone, the bedroom door shutting softly behind him with a quiet snick. Focus, Harry told himself, sinking, with great difficulty this time, into the cocoon-like womb environment. He found his heartbeat and was able to center on it and gradually, gradually, surrounded himself with the protective waters. The burning pain and pressure disappeared with the outside world.

A shrill ringing noise kicked him out of his still-occluded state almost two hours later. He roused himself, his hidden consciousness rejoining the small part of him he'd left in the bedroom. He fumbled on the bedside table for the alarm clock and managed to turn it off, knocking his glasses on the floor as he did so. He groped around until he found them. As his vision cleared, he checked the clock. 2:10 a.m.

Snape! That's what Snape had done before he left—he'd turned on the alarm to give Harry a push back into awareness since he wouldn't be there to give the usual visual signal.

Harry got out of bed and walked slowly into the corridor. Snape had left the light on in the loo but the rest of the flat was dark. Snape's bedroom door was open. Harry peeked in, not expecting to find Snape back yet. The black negligee hung over the back of a chair beside the bed. The bed was still made and the Muggle clothing Snape had worn around London was tossed on it with the guidebook resting on top of the clothes.

Harry entered the room and picked up the book. The section devoted to the Tower of London and the Tower Bridge was marked with a scrap of parchment. He closed the door and walked into the living room. The room was illuminated only with the dim light from the street lamps below. And it was quiet…very quiet…save a sharp tap tap tap at the window. Harry took several steps closer. Perched on the outside ledge was a very familiar white owl. He hurriedly opened the window and Hedwig hopped in, immediately flying to the empty owl roost. Harry reached out his hand and stroked her back. "What do you have for me, girl?" he asked. His insides were tight—he wasn't sure he wanted to know what message she'd have for him at two o'clock in the morning on a night when Snape had been summoned.
But oddly enough, Hedwig didn't have a letter or message of any kind.

Harry considered what this could mean. She could have been waylaid and the letter stolen. Or she could have lost the letter—though Harry suspected that post owls simply did not lose letters—ever. There was even the possibility that she had come to find Harry on her own—for whatever reason. Hedwig didn't seem inclined to go anywhere, roosting quietly on the perch and occasionally preening a feather or two. She looked, Harry thought, as if she'd settled in for the night.

He gave her a worried look as he settled on the sofa. The temptation to look for Voldemort through their link, to find Snape, was strong but he fought it down. Sparing one more look at Hedwig, already sleeping with her head tucked down, he picked up the guidebook and began to read about the Tower of London.

Chapter 28

August 13th

WAITING

At 4 a.m., Harry made tea.

He napped on the sofa from 4:30 until 6 a.m., the guidebook on the floor, tented open to a chapter on St. Paul's Cathedral. There were 528 steps to the very top of the dome. He wondered if he could even make the first 257 to the Whispering Gallery.

From 6 until 6:45, he read the lengthy section about Queen Victoria and her short-lived husband, Albert (for some reason he had snickered at Albert's title, Prince Consort). He resolved to see the special widow's crown Victoria had had made, less ostentatious and more befitting the mourning attire she wore for forty years. The guidebook said the crown was displayed at the Tower of London.

At 6:45, he made toast but could only stomach two pieces.

He fell asleep again at 7, not waking up until nearly 9 a.m.

At 9 a.m., Harry took a shower and put on one of the two sets of clean clothes he'd brought with him.

At 9:30, he pulled his journal out of his backpack, sat down at the desk in the living room and wrote the word "FEAR" at the top of a new page. He wrote about fear until 10:30. He could have written more but all the writing about fear was actually making him more afraid.

Another pot of tea at 10:30, accompanied by some rhubarb and orange crackers he'd found in individually-wrapped packages in a drawer.

At 11, a sound in the outside corridor had him on the feet and nearly opening the door. But the footsteps went to the other door on the landing. He sat back down.

At 11:15, he opened his journal again and wrote the words "SEA DREAM," leaving several blank pages in case he wanted to continue writing about fear later. He wrote out a narrative of the dream, as best he could remember, then listed the symbolic elements they hadn't yet discussed—the snitch, the phoenix, the pensieve, the minnows-turned-memories, the feather, the Philosopher's Stone, the
sword. He remembered the dream ended with him reaching out for Dumbledore's gloved hand, then remembered the blackened hand that had rested on his arm at the cottage. He wondered again what possible curse could have done this to Dumbledore. Then he wondered how Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard in the world by Harry's estimation, could have gotten cursed to begin with.

He did his physical therapy exercises at noon, three hours early.

At 12:30, he found a can of soup in the kitchen pantry. He heated it and ate it with slightly stale crackers. There were apples in the fridge. He cut one into slices and ate it slowly.

At 1:15 he went through the drawers and cupboard in his bedroom. There were a half dozen identical long-sleeved button-down shirts, some black, some white, hanging in the closet along with what looked like a Muggle party dress. He found a dog-eared novel in the bedside table drawer. It was titled *To Kill a Mockingbird* and was written by an American named Harper Lee. He took it out to the living room with him.

The pain began at 3:15. He was still reading the novel and dropped it in surprise. No longer centered in the scar, the pain crackled up and down his arms, his legs, his torso. The muscles in his thighs and legs tensed and spasmed.

At 3:28, he was finally able to occlude, after suffering the Cruciatus for thirteen minutes. He didn't keep half an eye open.

At 4 p.m. a bright flash and sharp crack heralded the arrival in the room of a red and gold phoenix. A yellow feather floated to the floor as Fawkes dropped a letter at Harry's feet and then disappeared with another flash and crack. Harry did not stir. The letter, in Albus Dumbledore's recognizable handwriting, read: "S is delayed. Stay inside. Do not use the owl."

At 5:20, a hand on his shoulder and a hoarse, whispered word—"Harry"—brought him back to the flat in London. As consciousness and conscious thought returned, feeling returned to his injured, tortured legs. Harry stifled a scream and drew his legs up even more tightly against his chest.

"We've got to figure something out, Albus! A sixteen-year-old can't take that kind of torture. He'll go over the edge." Harry sighed. Hands were rubbing the potion into his injured arm and the pain, which had faded after the first application, eased even more.

"I have read what I could find, Severus. It's been difficult to devote enough time to research with the Ministry still all over the castle. All indications are that he is a type of empath, but tuned into only you at this time. You are not protected under the Fidelius here, so we can likely eliminate that as an explanation of the connection."

"I can do nothing about it, Albus! I have been powerless to stop the transfer. That's why I discussed the other option with Minerva…"

"The other option, as you so cryptically put it, would take months."

"Not necessarily. He may have it in his make-up. He consistently shows signs of magical ability beyond his age-level. A corporeal Patronus in 3rd year! And that D.A. last year! His parents—yes, both of them, though you know it pains me to admit it—were powerful. It could be something he could master in weeks instead of months, Albus."

"Unfortunately, Transfiguration is one of his weaker subjects. Furthermore, can he split his attention, Severus? Should he? You know I will have to start his education on the matter we discussed soon
"I don't know, Albus. Honestly, I do not. I feel as if I've been broad-sided this summer. This… connection…he had forged with me was not expected."

"Be honest—you have forged this with each other. Think, Severus. Harry and Voldemort are connected—Voldemort has seen fit to block that connection since the incident at the Ministry. You and Voldemort are connected, though the connection through the Dark Mark seems to flow only from Voldemort to you and not in the opposite direction. Now you and Harry are connected as well—the three of you forming a perfect triangle, so to speak. We now have three incidences of Harry feeling your pain, but all three times it was pain inflicted by Voldemort. He will likely not feel ordinary pain and emotion. This connection may ultimately be more useful than harmful, given what is likely to come."

"You ask too much, Albus."

"And now I ask more. You must continue to mentor him. For my part, I will teach him as much as I can in the time that I have."

Harry was half-awake, but the part that was awake was closely following his professors. His brain was too foggy still to sort out the meaning in what they were discussing. He tried to feign sleep but when Snape began to rub the potion into his calves, he couldn't help but groan.

"Harry, you may as well open your eyes. I know you are awake."

"Harry, how are you feeling?" Dumbledore's voice was still worry-edged.

Harry stretched and winced and managed to turn to his side. Snape dropped a light blanket over him—he'd been stripped to his boxers, apparently so Snape could administer the post-Cruciatus cream, though he had no recollection of losing his other clothing. He also had no recollection of Dumbledore's arrival.

"Better," Harry managed. "Tight and achy, but much better." He studied the slightly blurry form of Snape. "How about you?"

Snape brushed Harry's question—and his concern—aside. "I am fine. I am accustomed to the pain. Harry, this cannot go on. We must resolve this before you are permanently affected."

"But what about what the Headmaster said? That the connection could be useful?"

He watched Snape and Dumbledore exchange quick glances. "You weren't meant to hear that, and the headmaster was just conjecturing," replied Snape.

A soft hoot from the direction of the window reminded Harry that his owl had appeared during the night.

"Hedwig!" he said. "I found her here—outside the window—when the alarm woke me. She didn't have a letter or anything…"

"I sent her to you when I received Professor Snape's patronus," said Dumbledore. "I thought that with the means of sending a missive by owl, you would not be as tempted to use the Floo or underage magic while Severus was gone."

"I thought about that," said Harry. "I thought of a lot of other stuff too—that maybe she'd had a letter for me but that it had been intercepted somehow." He made a move to get up off the sofa but Snape's
arm pushed him back down.

"You won't want to put any weight on those legs yet," he said.

Harry dropped back onto his side on the couch, groaning slightly as he adjusted his legs. "Why did he do it?" he asked. "Why did he hit you with the Crucius?"

"I was the last to arrive," said Snape flatly. Harry knew he was telling the truth. "You don't want to be the last to arrive."

"I made you last," said Harry. "You had to set that alarm, and send a Patronus to Dumbledore."

"I was last because I chose to make you my first priority," said Snape. "This is sounding suspiciously like guilt again. Perhaps more journaling is in order?"

"Severus," cut in Dumbledore. "You need to get into bed. Harry certainly seems better now. Poppy was quite insistent…"

"Poppy worries unnecessarily. I have taken the nerve restorative and have an ample supply of cream here."

"You and Harry cannot possibly navigate London…"

"Then we will stay in the flat tomorrow and continue our holiday the following day."

"Poppy? Madam Pomfrey?" asked Harry. "You said you were fine!"

Snape turned quickly away from Dumbledore and spun to face Harry. His face looked slightly gray and his wand arm visibly trembled."

"I am, as you put it, fine. In fact, I am better than fine. You, however, cannot yet straighten your legs and your arm has suffered more nerve damage."

"Severus!"

Harry watched as Severus took one more long look at him then turned and walked away down the hall. Dumbledore looked after him for a moment then turned the desk chair around and sat on it, facing Harry.

"You shouldn't yell at him, really," said Harry softly, feeling very brazen for challenging the headmaster.

"Oh? And why is that?" responded Dumbledore with only the faintest hint of a twinkle in his eyes. It looked to Harry that his eyes wanted to twinkle but came up against a little too much worry to be successful.

"He's just worried about me, I guess," said Harry. He chewed on that thought a moment after saying it. "And scared. Like when Ron's Mom sent him that howler after we took the flying car to school second year. She could have killed him she was so angry—but really she was just scared and worried." Realization about what he had just said hit him. "I…I don't mean that he's worried about me like a parent. I mean he's in charge of me this summer—I'm his student and all. He's the adult…"

But Dumbledore was smiling. "Harry, I believe you are correct. Now…I must get back to Hogwarts. While it may be hard to believe, the re-warding is not yet complete. However, I will send someone here as soon as I get back to stay here with you and Severus until you are back to your normal
selves. And tomorrow night, I may need to take you on a little errand with me—if you are feeling well and Severus will allow it, that is."

"An errand?" Harry could not help but be intrigued. An errand with Dumbledore? And why did Dumbledore need Snape's permission?

"Indeed. I find myself in need of a new professor, and the candidate I have in mind needs a bit of persuasion." He left it at that, bid Harry goodbye and left my way of the floo. Ten minutes later, when Harry was beginning to nod off again, the floo flared and out stepped Professor McGonagall.

To his infinite relief, she was wearing her robes and not the black neglige.

Chapter 29

PROFESSOR MCGONAGALL

"No, I imagine you did not." Harry very much appreciated her no-nonsense air. He didn't need anyone fawning over him right now. She put her bag down on the desk and took her wand out of her robes. "I am going to check on Severus," she said. "He can be a bit cranky when it comes to accepting help so please ignore any shouts or sounds of lamps or knick-knacks being thrown against the wall."

She set off down the hall and within moments he did indeed hear raised voices. Snape's voice was low yet distinct and he would make it out clearly.

"I told Albus I am perfectly fine, Minerva! I'd just like to get some sleep—I was up all night helping plot the destruction of mankind as we know it!"

"Fine, Severus. I will leave you to rest. Just give me a shout if you need to use the loo so I can help you with all those buttons. Poppy said full feeling won't return to your fingers for at least another day."

That statement was followed by the sound of something hitting the wall which was closely followed by the sound of the door closing and...no...not a snort of laughter?

A horrific thought struck him—was Professor McGonagall planning on helping him use the loo? He began flexing the fingers of his left hand, not even bothering with his nearly useless right one. They appeared to be in good working order and were only slightly numb. He resolved to hold it in—forever if necessary—if it came to needing help.

But his Head of House didn't mention the loo when she came back five minutes later with an over-loaded tea tray spinning slowly in the air beside her. She had filled it with interesting biscuits including some Scottish shortbread, ladyfingers and an American chocolate sandwich variety that was popular at Hogwarts. She poured his tea and held up the milk. He nodded and she added a trickle. "One, please," he said when she indicated the sugar. She stirred his cup then set it down and, without asking his permission or giving any indication of what she was about, rearranged him so that his legs were still drawn up, but his body situated in a corner of the couch, only half-reclining. She then handed him the cup and put three biscuits on the saucer.

Harry bit into a piece of shortbread and sipped his tea. The warm liquid seemed to course through him, making even his fingertips tingle.
"What's in this?" he asked, suspicious of the feeling and of the slightly more bitter than normal taste.

"A muscle relaxant," she answered without apology. "Poppy said it will help you get those legs worked out sooner. Drink up, Mr. Potter." She settled on a comfortable looking wingback chair and selected a biscuit. "Now, I understand that you've expressed an interest in studying to be an Animagus?"

Well, that had come out of nowhere. When had Snape had time to discuss that particular topic with her? "Umm…yeah. I mean yes, I think I am. I found an interesting book about it back at the cottage but Professor Snape took it away." He tried not to sound petulant—he really wasn't complaining, was he?

"Of course he did. He felt you had quite enough to accomplish this summer without starting down that difficult road as well. Furthermore, he was quite determined that if you did decide to pursue the study, you would do so with an experienced adult and not on your own. While we were all immensely proud of your extracurricular defense group last year—taking your education into your own hands when there really was no other choice—the same cannot be said for this particular line of study. And yes, I do indeed now realize that your father and his friends chartered their own course, so to speak. Exceedingly dangerous, though.

"Professor McGonagall," asked Harry. "How did you know I was interested in becoming an Animagus?"

She looked at him keenly, almost as if he was coming up a few brain cells too short in this conversation. "Why, Severus Floo-called me after you had gone to bed that night. It was only a matter of time, after all—we'd all been watching for any signs of interest on your part. What with your father and Sirius both…. Well, anyway, we discussed the matter at some length and both feel that if you are able to master becoming an Animagus, it might actually replace the need for Occlumency."

"Replace Occlumency? What do you mean?" This was intriguing.

"While I understand that you have been extremely successful in occluding, it is almost as if you do it too well. You put in place a nearly complete sensory block. Professor Snape is concerned that you could literally lose yourself in your occluded state—that without someone to pull you out of it, you would remain occluded…" She trailed off, not finishing the statement. "Anyway, he was intrigued with the Animagus possibility as a safer alternative to Occlumency."

Harry had been warned by both Professor Snape and Professor McGonagall about the life-threatening risks of Animagus transformation. And how she was saying it was safer than Occlumency?

"Professor Snape and I tried an experiment." He returned his wandering attention to his head of house, who was continuing. "I transformed into my feline form and he attempted to legilimize me. Even while staring directly into my eyes, and with no attempt on my part to occlude, it was a complete failure! He couldn't read me at all. The animal mind is fundamentally different than the human mind and while a witch or wizard is in the Animagus form, their brain structure is … well, that of an animal." She chuckled. "And I was throwing out all kinds of tempting memories to him—hunting for mice in his potions cupboard, jumping from shelf to shelf, curling up on his lap one evening after a particularly-long staff meeting, me awarding points to a group of Gryffindors for their exemplary bravery in battling a troll…"

Harry smiled. "So…because a Legilimens can't break into an animal's mind, if I can transform into an animal form, I won't need to occlude. I can basically break the link between myself and
Harry had been worried about that. What if he found himself in the body of an earthworm or a jellyfish? "So you don't get to choose your form. Not ever?"

"No, Mr. Potter, you do not. The intrinsic nature of a witch or wizard is the most influential factor, but not the only one. For example, in my younger days—and don't you repeat this, mind you—I was often accused of being quite catty. My mentor, Adella Shufflebottom, the witch with whom I studied the Animagus transformation, had a reputation for fiercely protecting her charges. Not surprisingly, her Animagus form was a bear.

"So…why was…" he paused. It was still difficult to speak of his godfather in the past tense. He lowered his voice. "Why was Sirius a dog?"

McGonagall stared at him keenly a moment. "Have you ever owned a dog, Mr. Potter?"

He shook his head. Before Sirius, his experience with dogs was limited to Aunt Marge's dog Ripper.

"Ahhh. Well, one of the most endearing qualities of a dog is loyalty. Sirius Black, while perhaps the bane of my existence for several years in Gryffindor House, was as loyal as a Hufflepuff to his friends and housemates. His actual Animagus form was curious—a mutt rather than a purebred variety. It was as if even in his Animagus form, he rejected the Purebred society in which he had been brought up."

"Well, I can see why Peter Pettigrew was a rat," said Harry. His resentment of Wormtail grew every time he thought of him in the same conversation as Sirius. "But what about my dad? Why a stag?"

Professor McGonagall looked at Harry. "Sometimes I forget, Harry, that you never knew your father. Those who knew him and loved him would find it apt that the man who died protecting you had the Animagus form of a stag. The stag is the protector of the forest, one who will stand his own ground, watchful and valiant. A stag is both independent and proud and in some cultures represents purity."

"My Patronus is a stag," said Harry, looking down into his teacup.

"I am aware of that, Mr. Potter," answered Professor McGonagall, smiling slightly over her teacup. "It is not unusual for one's Animagus form and one's Patronus to be the same or similar. Mine, for example, are the same. But it is not a given. Sometimes, it is one's emotional make-up rather than one's nature that most influences the Animagus form. Someone who has loved keenly may actually take on a form more similar to the loved one than to himself or herself. This is especially common when one has lost the loved one tragically."

"Do you have to be good at Transfiguration to be an Animagus?" asked Harry, a bit worried. He recalled now that Dumbledore had been concerned that Transfiguration wasn't his strongest subject.
"You do," answered his professor, not beating around the bush. "Theory and practice. Extra practice will help you considerably, Mr. Potter. You tend to be successful at whatever you really put your mind to, so I suggest you begin putting your mind to Transfiguration during your 6th year. If Professor Snape decides the time is right, I will take you on as an apprentice this year. I have one seventh year interested as well, but there is room in my schedule for two this term."

"If Professor Snape decides...?" That reminded him of what Dumbledore had said before he left—that he had an errand Harry was to go on if Snape would allow it.

"Well, he has assumed responsibility for you this summer, hasn't he? And adult consent is required if the witch or wizard begins training while still under-aged. Normally, the consent is given by the parents or guardians." She shook her head. "I don't know where the Headmaster is with resolving your situation."

"My situation? What do you mean?"

"Has Severus not spoken to you about this yet?" Her lips narrowed into a thin line as Harry shook his head. "Mr. Potter, you can hardly go back to the Dursleys now, can you? Yet you are still under-aged. You will need a guardian. Since you are in school full-time, one of your professors will likely assume the responsibility."

"Oh." Harry considered that a moment. He supposed it wasn't all that important, just a formality, since he was already sixteen.

"Harry, I will be happy to formally fulfill that role for this last year and have told Professor Dumbledore as much. I am sure he will discuss this with you soon." She reached over to her handbag and pulled out a roll of parchment and conjured a quill and ink. "Now, let's do something productive while we wait for Professor Snape to stumble out here, too proud to ask for help." She grinned, somewhat evilly in Harry's opinion. "Let's make a list of your innate qualities and strengths and see if we can predict what your Animagus form might be."

Harry perked up. That sounded interesting. But frankly, he was already a bit tired of all of this introspection he'd been doing at the bidding of his instructors.

"Does that work? Were you able to predict your form?"

She smiled wryly. "It does work, sometimes. In my case, I predicted I'd be a cougar. I supposed I imagined myself a bit more fierce and exotic than a simple house cat. Still, I suppose I was on the right track."

They worked for a half an hour, listing qualities such as loyalty, protectiveness, rashness, stubbornness and compassion. McGonagall suggested, rather kindly he thought, that Harry had been so inordinately affected by loss in his short life that his Animagus form might seek to honor those he had lost more than one or more of his most salient traits.

Harry pondered this, wondering if he could be a dog, or a stag. He supposed it was most likely he'd turn out to be a stag like his father. A fleeting thought crossed his mind. His mother.

"I guess my mum wasn't an Animagus," he said. "Do you know what form her Patronus took?"

An odd look crossed the professor's face and he thought she glanced down the hallway before she answered. But she shook her head.

"No Mr. Potter. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't."
Harry slept on the couch for two hours. When he woke at nearly 9 o'clock in the evening, he didn't recall falling asleep. He'd been talking with Professor McGonagall about her first transformation into her Animagus form. The last thing he remembered her saying was "I wouldn't transform back when my instructor gave me the signal. I was really enjoying licking my leg. So she reverted me herself with a spell. I found myself on the floor in a very awkward position with my leg stretched out nearly above my head and my mouth full of fur."

Harry looked around. Though it was dark outside, the street lamps from below softly illuminated the front room of the flat. Professor McGonagall was sleeping in the wingback chair, the book Harry had been reading—*To Kill a Mockingbird*—propped open on her lap. She was making a gentle whistling noise with every exhale. He heard the commode flush as he carefully maneuvered himself into a seated position. His legs felt much better but his arm was still sore and painfully tingly, as if he had slept heavily on it and it was trying to wake up. He tentatively flexed and stretched each leg then stood upright, grabbed his t-shirt and jeans from the desk where Snape had apparently placed them, neatly folded, and put them back on. With a relieved glance at his sleeping Head of House, he waited until he heard Snape's bedroom door close then headed off to use the loo. He found his right arm to be practically useless—he could bend it at the elbow but his fingers were stiff and it hurt to twist his wrist. He held it, as he had when he was recovering from the accident on Privet Drive, close to his chest and used his left hand for all the essentials.

Professor Snape was standing in the corridor when he came out of the loo. He was holding a potion, but instead of handing it to him, he indicated that Harry should follow him into his bedroom. He nodded to the unmade bed, and Harry sat down tentatively on its edge. Snape knelt on the floor in front of Harry, wincing as his knees hit the hardwood.

"You are obviously feeling better," said Snape as he reached out and took Harry's right arm by the elbow. "Relax it as much as possible, Mr. Potter."

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, grimacing as Snape ran his wand from the inside of his elbow down to his wrist, roughly along the length of the faint scar left by Uncle Vernon's hubcap. "Legs are working, anyway."

"Make a fist," instructed Snape. The tip of his wand was resting on the pulse point of Harry's right wrist. Harry dutifully made the fist. Snape looked up at him. "Is that as tight as you can manage?" he asked.


"I imagine it does." Snape handed the potion to Harry and Harry quickly swallowed it. Snape then reached for the post-Cruciatus cream, extracted a generous amount from the tub and began to rub it in, concentrating on Harry's hand, wrist and forearm. Harry watched him close the jar and push it back a few inches on the night stand to align perfectly with two other jars there.

"Did you keep busy today?" asked Snape as he carefully stood up, wincing slightly.

Harry nodded. "I wrote in my journal a lot. Tried to remember all the symbolic elements at the end of
my sea dream. I read, too. A book I found in my bedroom—*To Kill a Mockingbird.*"

Snape's eyes sparked, showing his interest. "A very good book to read in times like these." He didn't explain what he meant and Harry didn't ask, but he did resolve to finish the book.

"We are going to have to discuss some alternative means of treatment for your arm," continued Snape. "I'm sorry to have to bring this up, but if you want to continue your gilded career as Gryffindor Seeker, you will need more range of motion as well as greater strength and flexibility in your arm and hand."

Quidditch. Harry hadn't thought of that. Almost involuntarily, he flexed his fingers as if curving them around a golden snitch. His fist was loose at best—he could imagine the snitch sliding right through his fingers. He looked up at Snape, a question on his lips. Snape spoke before he could form his question.

"Poppy recommended a specialist. It may involve a trip to St. Mungos—and perhaps treatment there over a day or two. There is a potion, similar to Skelegrow, for nerve regeneration, but it requires careful monitoring. The Headmaster is working on suitable arrangements—there is an Auror's ward there that has extremely tight security…"

Harry looked up from his study of his hand. "Harry Potter—done in by a hubcap," he said, sighing. "Can we have our second day in London before we see this specialist?"

Snape held out his hand and pulled Harry to his feet. "Of course. I believe I rashly told the Headmaster we would rest and recuperate tomorrow, so we'll reschedule our visit to the Tower of London and Greenwich for the day after. I will ask Madam Pomfrey to make the arrangements with St. Mungos for the day following that if at all possible."

An hour later, Professor McGonagall was properly thanked and dispatched. "Harry is a good candidate for study with me, Severus," she said before she Flooed away. "We could begin in September and try an accelerated schedule. Consider it."

"Why are you so keen on me finding a different way to shield my mind?" Harry asked abruptly when she disappeared with a flare of flame. He had turned to face Snape, who was sitting on her vacated wingback chair. "It's because of this connection to you, isn't it? What do you expect me to do if you get called while I'm in the middle of class? Transform into my Animagus form so I don't get more nerve damage? What if my form is a buffalo? I'd probably take out both Ron and Hermione! Or what if it's something really small, like a spider? Ron would step on me before he even thought about it!"

"Mr. Potter…"

"Professor McGonagall said that her Animagus form is the same as her Patronus. It's not like I could prance around Hogwarts incognito as Prongs! I don't even know if I could get those antlers through the doorway. I'd have to go sideways, but then the rest of my body wouldn't fit…"

"Mr. Potter, please…"

"And I didn't even get around to discussing the markings with her. Her cat's markings look like her glasses. And so did Rita Skeeters'! Is mine going to have a lightning bolt scar down the middle of its forehead? Or round glasses? That won't give me away, will it?"

"Harry, stop," said Snape, when Harry paused to breathe. "You are blowing this out of proportion. Sit down."
Harry flopped down onto the couch, wincing as the bounce jarred his arm. He drew his legs up on the couch in front of him, tucking his chin on his knees and stared at Snape.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I think I got carried away."

Snape rolled his eyes. "I'd say," he retorted. He looked at Harry a long moment. "I am having a hard time determining if you are anxious about studying to be an Animagus or anxious about something else—perhaps this connection to me you have developed or the prospect of having treatment at St. Mungos."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Not about becoming an Animagus—though it would be nice to know what animal I'd become before going through the whole thing and ending up a newt or something."

"I don't know…I could keep a newt in a ventilated jar on my shelf and not have to worry where you'd gotten off to..." said Snape. He trailed off but it was too late. Harry was no longer looking at his knees. He was, instead, looking carefully at Snape. He half expected Snape to back peddle, but to his credit, he did not.

Harry let the sentiment hang in the air between them. He didn't need to comment on it—it would make Snape more uncomfortable and frankly, he wasn't given to deep emotional conversations either. But he wanted to explain his anxiety to Snape. Unfortunately, he didn't know how or where to start. He decided to begin in the middle...with the thoughts and feelings that were closest to the surface. He'd have to muddle through this if he was going to get anywhere.

"Listen...I don't know why all this is happening. I'm not trying to read your mind or link up to you to see what's happening at Hogwarts or with Voldemort or anything..." He watched Snape's reaction—he was somewhat insecure about this new relationship with Snape and sometimes wondered if Snape thought he had ulterior motives. Snape frowned.

"You aren't doing that—try or not—are you?"

Harry shook his head. "No. No, I'm not. Wouldn't you know if I did?"

"I should hope so," answered Snape, a bit tersely, looking a bit more suspicious than before.

"Well I'm not. I just thought you might think I was. But I'm not looking at all. That's the thing. It just hits me blindly—no lead-up at all. But this last bit—this afternoon—I mean, you weren't even here, were you? You were miles away."

"Hundreds of miles away," corrected Snape dryly.

"Right, hundreds of miles away and I still felt it. I can block it—as soon as I get my barrier up. It just takes longer when..." Harry paused, swallowed. Be brave, he told himself, be honest. "When you're the one in pain." He paused. Snape was staring at him intently, but he could not read any emotion or reaction in his dark eyes. "...I'm sure it would be the same with my other...with my friends...that it would be hard to occlude if I could feel their pain. Thing is...I don't. Feel their pain, that is." He paused again, feeling like he was both digging himself a hole and spinning in circles in place. Bravely – or very stupidly – he continued. "And I'm not even sure if I'm feeling Voldemort or if I'm feeling your pain..."

"You are feeling mine," interrupted Snape. He sounded resigned. "The Dark Lord tortures someone nearly every day. I brew post-Cruciatus by the vat for Wormtail. He twitches almost constantly now."
As much as he despised Pettigrew, Harry couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for the man.

"What did Dumbledore mean when he said that I might be an empath?"

"Empath," corrected Snape automatically. "And I do not believe you are—not in the traditional sense, anyway."

"Then why did Dumbledore…?"

Snape sighed and rubbed his forehead with one hand. "The word comes from empathy—in the Greek—passion or suffering. In English, it is a sense of feeling with a person, sensitivity to their happiness or suffering. An empath can enter into another's feelings and share them."

"Why do you think he's wrong, then?"

Snape dropped his head back so that it rested near the top of the chair, bent back so that he was looking at the ceiling. Harry found this to be a very vulnerable position for Snape and felt vaguely uncomfortable. Snape's smooth, pale neck and throat were far too exposed, as if waiting for the bite of fate.

"I do not believe you are an empath because your empathy seems uniquely directed at me and not at the world at large. Do you innately sense and understand your friend Ron's feelings? No? I thought not. As the Headmaster indicated, you seem tuned in only to me, and specifically to my suffering through the Dark Lord."

"Well, we don't know that, do we?" asked Harry. "Maybe I only feel it when Voldemort calls you or tortures you, but maybe I'd feel it if you hit your funny bone really hard or had a terrible toothache or ate something that was off and got sick to your stomach…"

Snape frowned at Harry, but it was one of those contemplative frowns that told Harry he was thinking seriously about what he said.

"And how do you know I don't feel your…what did you say went along with suffering in the Greek?"

"Passion," supplied Snape.

"Well, have you even felt passionate in the last couple weeks? Maybe I'd feel that too. It would be a heck of a lot better than the Cruciatius of feeling like my scar's burning into my brain."

Snape dropped his head forward into his hands, which were resting on his knees. Harry watched in confusion as the man's shoulders began to shake and odd noises, somewhere between sobs and snorts, escaped. Finally, Snape looked up at him. There were tear-streaks on his face but his eyes, his eyes were laughing. He shook his head.

"Mr. Potter, if you are a true empath and can feel my passion as well as my suffering, I will have to get a new job. I wouldn't last a day at Hogwarts after the first night you keep your dorm mates awake with…with…"

And now Harry was grinning too.

"But this is worth an experiment—no, Mr. Potter, not to see if you can share my "passion" as well as my suffering. I would like to see if you can feel my pain if its origin is benign. Let's try that abdominal distress you mentioned—there are potions to induce that, you know. We keep Muggle Ipecac syrup here for when Tonks goes on a binge…no..forget I said that."
"Tonks? Was that her...thingy?" asked Harry, suddenly interested.

Snape glared at Harry and stood up. A moment later, Harry heard him rummaging through the bathroom medicine cabinet. Moments after that, he heard the distinct and quite unpleasant sound of vomiting. Harry hardly had time to register the sound before he was doubled over on the floor, clutching his own stomach.

Five minutes later, Snape stumbled out into the living room, wiping his face with a wet flannel. He stopped and stared at Harry, who was on the floor clutching his stomach with his good arm and looking extremely pale.

Snape helped him to the couch and fetched him his own wet flannel. He sat down next to Harry. Neither said anything for several minutes.

"I presume you didn't get ill at the thought of me vomiting? Some people with sensitive stomachs..."

"Nope," said Harry.

Snape sighed. They sat quietly for several more minutes.

Finally, Harry spoke.

"Next time, just let me whack your funny bone."

Snape snorted.

Chapter 31

DREAM SYMBOLS

By noon the next day, Harry had finished more than half of his book, had written two pages in his journal with the charmed quill from Madam Pomfrey and had watched Londoners go in and out of the pub below for half an hour. He had returned to his entry on trust in the journal and had written about qualities of people he did not trust (like Draco Malfoy and Uncle Vernon) and those of people he did trust (like Hagrid and Professor Snape). He noted, when he finished, that Malfoy's current characteristics closely matched those he would have attributed to Snape only a month ago.

Snape had left for Hogwarts at 10 o'clock. He needed to be seen by the Ministry officials and to speak with Madam Pomfrey about Harry's appointment at St. Mungo's. Harry suspected he also wanted to speak to Professor Dumbledore about their little experiment last night, but Snape didn't admit that before he left.

Snape returned at one o'clock carrying a basket.

"That irksome house elf Dobby sent this," he said, putting the basket down on the desk in the living room.

"Smells good," said Harry, coming over and opening the basket with his left hand. "Looks like turkey sandwiches. Hey, he sent crisps too—and chocolate cake! I wouldn't call him irksome if I were you." He had pulled out a sandwich and taken a bite and was speaking with his mouth half-full.

"Heathen," muttered Snape, handing him a red and white checked napkin that looked as if it had
been stolen from an Italian bistro.

They ate in companionable silence and then Harry stretched out on the couch. He was becoming all too accustomed to an afternoon nap and drifted off with little effort. Although he was in the middle of London, he imagined he could hear the waves pounding outside the windows.

In his dream, he was back at Hogwarts. He, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were in the Gryffindor Common room, sitting on squishy chairs near the fire. Ginny was crammed into a chair with him, tracing the scar on his hand. "I ust o ell li," she said softly, holding his hand up for the others to see. "I think that cream Snape made for Harry is working." She gently kissed the scar and brought Harry's hand to rest against her heart—Harry could feel the sea in the steady beat of it. Ron and Hermione faded into the background as Harry leaned in to kiss Ginny. He was getting closer and closer to her face, focusing on her lips, when she let out a blood-curdling scream and leaped out of the chair. Harry threw out an arm to balance himself and instead thudded heavily into the chair in his Galapagos tortoise Animagus form. He was upside down, short legs flailing, trying to get purchase to turn over. "You almost kissed me with disgusting turtle lips!" shouted Ginny. Then all the Gryffindors were there laughing and cheering. Seamus and Dean turned him over and hefted him onto the floor. "Five sickles for a turtle ride!" "Me! Me!" screamed a group of 1st years. Harry's turtle brain was in panic. I don't know how to change back! He started lumbering across the common room floor toward the fireplace, a Gryffindor first-year straddling his back and hitting him on his shell near his tail yelling "Giddy-up!" Harry's turtle eyes were focused on the fireplace in front of him. If only he could reach the Floo powder! If only he were an ostrich, or a giraffe… But Dean was faster than Harry. He grabbed the Floo powder, tossed it in the fireplace and yelled "London Zoo!" Seamus and Ron pushed Tortoise Harry into the fire and he was spinning…spinning…spinning…no need to keep his elbows tucked in—his appendages retracted rather nicely into his shell…

He woke with a startled cry as his turtle-body landed, Wizard of Oz flying house fashion, on a sandy beach. When he opened his eyes, however, he was in the flat in London. He raised his left hand to verify that he was, indeed, still in human form.

A Galapagos tortoise! Where had that come from? Had Dobby put some special sauce on the turkey sandwiches?

He carefully sat up on the sofa. Snape was sitting in the wingback chair sleeping. Maybe Dobby had drugged the sandwiches… Harry stared at Snape for a long moment. He didn't look ill exactly, just vaguely unwell. As Harry observed him, Snape's left hand twitched. He suddenly felt very much like a voyeur and closed his eyes again, trying to recall the details of the strange dream. A giant tortoise!

If McGonagall gave any hint that you could determine your Animagus form in prophetic dreams, he was going to abandon the whole idea before he got any further. He stood up and went back to his bedroom to get his journal and when he returned, Snape was awake, blinking against the bright August sunlight shining in through the windows. He watched as Harry sat down on the sofa and placed his charmed quill and journal on the sofa table.

"Excellent timing, Mr. Potter," said Snape. He gave very little indication that he had been asleep moments before. "The Headmaster will be here in several hours—you are to accompany him on an errand this evening—a fool's errand, if you ask me—but an important one nonetheless. Until then, we will piece together the last bits of your first sea dream. You said you have listed the symbolic elements?"

"Uh…yeah…yes, I mean. Here in my journal." Harry began to page through, aware that Snape was watching the pages as they turned. He was distracted—too curious about his errand with the Headmaster to pay attention when he stopped turning when the book was open to the header FEAR
and yesterday's date. "Where am I going—with the Headmaster, I mean?"

"Hmph," grunted Snape, staring unapologetically at the journal. "The Headmaster is taking you to visit a former Hogwarts Professor—Horace Slughorn. He taught Potions while I was at Hogwarts. He's been retired as long as you've been alive."

"Why am I going, then?" asked Harry. "What am I supposed to do? Impress him with my potions skills?"

Snape rolled his eyes. Harry grinned, imagining himself slicing night crawlers into perfectly equal segments, measuring exactly twelve grams and adding them to a potion, stirring counter-clockwise with a glass rod.

"You, Mr. Potter, are the bait," responded Snape. "Slughorn 'collects' celebrities. Thus far, he has resisted the Headmaster's efforts to contact him about coming out of retirement for a year or two. So, the Headmaster plans to dangle some attractive bait in front of him to seal the deal."

Harry turned this over in his head.

"Was he planning on telling me any of this?"

Snape scoffed. "Use your brain, Potter."

"I should be all bent out of shape about this, shouldn't I?" said Harry, considering the matter again. "But…" He trailed off, not sure how to voice his thoughts.

"But…?"

"But it would be helping you out, right? You can't teach defense unless we get a new Potions Professor. You want that position, don't you?"

Snape didn't answer immediately. He appeared to be trying to formulate a careful answer.

"I mean, everyone says it. They say that you ask for it every year, and every year Dumbledore turns you down."

"And you believe this?"

"Well…no…" Harry paused. Snape was staring at him, hard, dark eyes intense. "Well, yes, I did believe it. Just assumed it was true. Guess it made sense to me."

"Made sense that a Potions Master would want to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

"Well if you don't, why is Dumbledore bothering to look for a new Potions Professor? Why isn't he looking for a new Defense teacher?"

"Mr. Potter, you do have a brain under that mop of hair and thick skull. I have seen ample evidence of it over the past days. Now use it. Perhaps it is not I that wants the position."

"But why would Dumbledore…Oh." Voldemort. Voldemort wanted Snape to become the DADA professor. The palpable knowledge of that made Harry's guts twist uncomfortably. Why would Voldemort want Snape in that position? To corrupt the minds of underage wizards? To give them a taste of the Dark Arts—as Moody had done during fourth year when he had demonstrated all three of the Unforgiveables and had actually cast Imperio on the students to see if they could resist the curse? Maybe he was actually testing to see which were the most weak-willed, the ones that could be
made to do his Dark Lord's bidding.

Then another thought struck Harry. That position was cursed. No teacher had managed to hold it for more than a year since Harry started at Hogwarts. If Dumbledore was letting Snape have the position this year, he knew something...something was going to happen. This must be a pivotal year somehow.

Snape was sitting back in his chair, hands steepled in front of him, elbows resting on his knees.

"Now, your dream?" 

Harry knew to let the matter go. Snape, by way of short half-conversations, was slowly giving Harry more information than he'd ever managed to get out of Dumbledore. He'd find out more later, ask a leading question or two over dinner or before bed when they were reading or practicing Occlumency. He sighed and opened his journal.

"The first thing I have is my broom—turning into a piece of driftwood," he began.

"The broom goes along with flying," said Snape. "What does flying represent to you?"

"Freedom and escape," answered Harry. "It's not just the freedom of defying gravity—it's being able to escape reality for a while, not worrying about...everything."

"In Muggle psychology, flying, well, being in control while flying, represents power, being able to control one's own circumstances. While Muggles of course cannot fly, I believe the symbolism is the same—there are many elements in your life you cannot control, but when you are flying, you are free of those restrictions. You have the control."

"So the broom turning into driftwood...?" asked Harry.

"You tell me," said Snape.

"I don't know—loss of control? Being stuck on the ground and having to face my problems?"

Snape's expression said he had gotten it right. Harry smiled and looked at his journal.

"The stone," he said after reviewing his list. "I reached into the water for the stone—the Philosopher's Stone. But when I picked it up out of the water it melted and left the snitch in my hand."

"The Stone only now, leave the snitch," directed Snape.

"I think the fact that it melts when I bring it out of the water and put it in my hand is probably most important," suggested Harry. "I don't know...I picked it up because it was glittery but when I got it in the light maybe it wasn't everything I thought it was..."

"Impressive," commented Snape, looking pleased. "And you were left with the snitch."

Harry smiled broadly. "The snitch is the end. It ends the hunt and means you've won—succeeded in your quest." He smiled again. He could almost feel the fluttering of the tiny golden wings in his palm.

"You've missed your calling, Mr. Potter. So, at what have you succeeded?"

Harry puzzled that one a moment. "Perhaps letting the stone go?"
Snape nodded. "Perhaps."

"The next part is when the snitch opens and the reborn Phoenix comes out."

This time Snape gave it a go. "So, if the snitch is the end—success—than what the snitch contains is…?"

"The prize." Harry smiled. "But a Phoenix reborn? On a pile of ashes?"

"The Phoenix is the symbol of immortality, Harry," supplied Snape, quietly.

"But the stone…"

"An artifice. Man-made. It failed for Voldemort and ultimately for Flamel as well."

"So the prize of the fight won is immortality. But the ashes…"

"Quite the opposite. Not so much death but what remains of a life ended," Snape paused. "The Catholics use ashes made from incinerating palm fronds in their Ash Wednesday services—the first day of the Lenten Season. They make the sign of the cross on one's forehead with ashes and say 'Remember man that you are dust and unto dust you will return.' It is to remind the faithful of their own mortality."

Harry looked thoughtful. "The baby phoenix dropped a tear into the water. That's where the minnows turned into memories and the Pensieve appeared. The thing I remember most is how the memories still looked like minnows, flicking their tails around."

"Memories are living things," mused Snape. He stood suddenly and walked over to the window, looking down onto the street below. Harry waited.

"The last part," said Snape at last, turning toward Harry again. "The feather."

"Gryffindor's sword," said Harry. "The same one Fawkes gave me, in the Sorting Hat, down in the Chamber of Secrets. I guess that's the connection—the phoenix's feather turning into Gryffindor's sword. Does it mean anything that it was underwater?"

Snape was eying him very steadily.

"Some dreams," he began, "are meant to work out our troubles in life. Our subconscious mind plays with our worries and fears and hopes when we can't control it fully, while we are sleeping. Other dreams magnify our fears and troubles. But this…this has all the markings of a very rare type of dream—a prophetic dream. Do you understand what that means?" He looked up at Harry. Harry had paled.

"Do not be afraid of it, Harry," said Snape. "Embrace it instead. I did not expect this from you, but going into this fight, we need all the ammunition we can muster. You must keep your eyes open—you must look for these symbols appearing in your life. And we must discuss this fully with the Headmaster. I think…I think there are pieces of this dream he must be made aware of."

Harry nodded. He felt vaguely like Professor Trelawny. He felt uncomfortable, like a fraud. His discomfiture must have been evident to Professor Snape.

"What is troubling you?"

"The whole idea of a prophetic dream, I guess. I've already got the prophecy hanging over my
head…and now a prophetic dream. I'm certainly not a prophet." He laughed. "The savior comes after the prophets, right?"

Snape shook his head. "I think you misunderstand. A prophetic dream does not predict the future, Harry. It gives you tools…ideas…to make the desired future a reality."

Harry considered this a moment and saw the wisdom in it. Then something else occurred to him.

"I had another dream…while I was napping a little while ago."

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Really? Do you believe it to be prophetic as well?"

Harry laughed. "I hope not. Turtles don't have a special significance, do they?"

Snape stared at Harry, eyes wide. "You had a dream about turtles?"

"Actually, I was the turtle. Is that important?"

Snape put his head in his hands and sighed.

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Chapter 32: Chapter 32

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August 14th

WANTED

Harry was resting on his bed, his left arm flung over his face. After Snape had explained to Harry that the turtle was one of the most symbolic of animals, appearing in ancient and Native American cultures and mythology and representing longevity, immortality, heaven and earth, protection and more, Harry had stared at him a long moment and said "I'm going to go lie down for a while."

Snape had let him go and now Harry was trying very hard not to fall asleep. The last thing he needed right now was another dream. To distract himself, he picked up his book and read for more than an hour before finally falling asleep. He did not remember dreaming when he awoke.

Snape and Harry had take-out Chinese for dinner. They played a quick game of chess afterwards—quick because a distracted Harry was even worse at chess than a Harry who was paying attention. After the first game, Snape wisely put away the chessboard and fished out the London guidebook from the desk drawer. They charted their course for the next day, deciding on Greenwich first and the Tower of London and Tower Bridge on the way back, with the possibility of stopping in to see St. Paul's Cathedral. Snape put the book away and then had Harry settle on the couch while he brought out the potions and creams he'd been using to treat Harry's arm. He finished by placing the arm back in the sling, adjusting it so that Harry's elbow was bent at a ninety degree angle and the arm was held closely and tightly against his stomach.

"You haven't asked about the treatment at St. Mungo’s," he said quietly as he adjusted the sling.

"Why? Is there something I should know?" asked Harry suspiciously. He had become so accustomed to trusting Snape that it hadn't even occurred to him to ask more questions about the upcoming visit.

"Yes, there is," replied Snape. He finished adjusting the sling and began to rub more post-Cruciatu
cream between Harry's fingers and onto the palm of his hand. "The specialist will evaluate the condition of your arm before deciding on the most appropriate course of treatment. Treatment will likely involve a potion similar to Skele-Gro."

Harry shuddered. His experience with Skele-Gro had been an extremely painful one. Snape noted his shudder and pursed his lips.

"Unfortunately, regrowing nerves is an exceedingly painful process. There are actually two processes involved—one to strip out the existing damaged nerves and a second to regrow them."

Harry's mouth had almost dropped open. Stripping out nerves? Was Snape insane? He thought twice before saying that out loud, however.

"Is that…is that absolutely necessary?" he asked instead.

"No," answered Snape. "Nerves that are not severed totally will often regrow and repair on their own, sometimes at a rate of a millimeter or so a day. Do you want to wait that long?"

Harry was quickly trying to do the calculations in his head. His forearm, he figured, was no more than 30 centimeters long. So, 300 millimeters…

"That would take nearly a year!"

"And there are no guarantees, either. The damage may be too severe for the regrowth to happen on its own, Harry. I am not telling you this to give you a panic attack. I simply am not in favor of taking you to St. Mungo's without you understanding there is the possibility of having to stay there for two or three days."

Harry's eyes widened. Two or three days?

"What day is it? Today?"

"Today is Wednesday, August 14th," answered Snape. "We will be going to St. Mungo's on Friday. I would expect your release by Sunday, Monday at the latest. Following that, we may be able to return to Hogwarts to await the start of term."

"Can I…can I sign myself in?" asked Harry, remembering McGonagall's reference to the need for a guardian for Harry.

Snape shook his head. "You are still underage in the wizarding world, and your treatment will require your guardians' consent. Professor Dumbledore visited the Dursleys today to acquire that consent."

"What if they won't sign?" asked Harry. He wasn't sure if he wanted them to agree to sign or refuse to do so.

"Are you hoping they don't?" countered Snape shrewdly. "Professor Dumbledore can be quite persuasive." He let that statement hang and less than five minutes later the Floo flared to life and Professor Dumbledore stepped into the room, dusting off his cobalt blue robes.

An hour later, Harry found himself in the most unlikely of situations. He was sitting in a strange Muggle's home, on a sofa covered with a very colorful afghan, making small talk with a very fat man while Dumbledore used the loo. Now that had been unexpected. Not that he used the loo—but that he had done so directly after having arrived and repairing the huge mess Slughorn had made in an attempt to throw Dumbledore off his trail. Slughorn was staring at him, his gaze flickering to Harry's
eyes occasionally, then resting on his scar. The man was absolutely paranoid, leaving Harry to wonder what exactly was happening in the wizarding world this summer to make him so jumpy.

He was happy to leave there with Dumbledore soon afterward, even though the trip back to the flat involved another go at side-along apparition. Dumbledore seemed to think the errand was an unmitigated success.

Snape was waiting for them when they returned to the flat.

"You were successful, I take it?"

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who had a satisfied smile on his face.

"Indeed. Horace will be returning to Hogwarts as our new Potions Professor in two weeks time."

"And you will warn Harry about him? You will not let him use him to advance his own fame and fortune?"

Harry quickly glanced over at Snape. Snape was paying no attention at all to Harry, focusing solely on the Headmaster.

"I suspect you have already done so, Severus," replied Dumbledore. "However, we accomplished our errand despite Harry's reservations at meeting Horace."

"He will not be part of that braggart's club," insisted Snape. "I will fill Harry in on the details and you will not encourage him to humor the old codger."

Dumbledore, instead of looking miffed that Snape was taking this attitude with him, looked strangely satisfied.

"Severus, please. Handle this how you see fit with Harry. For now, we have another matter to discuss." He pulled out two rolls of parchment from a hidden inside pocket of his robes and placed them on the sofa table, sitting down in one of the wingback chairs while Severus settled on the end of the sofa. Harry stood where he was, unsure if he was to be included in this discussion.

"Sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore. "This conversation is about you and you should have a say in it."

Harry sat down on the sofa, leaving a cushion between himself and Snape. Dumbledore reached over and picked up one of the roles of parchment and unrolled it, stretching it out on the table.

"The Dursleys have signed the consent for treatment form," he said without preamble, passing the parchment over to Snape.

"They probably hope the treatment will be incredibly painful," commented Harry, trying to get a look at the complicated form Snape was perusing.

"They have also signed the other form," continued Dumbledore with only a sidelong glance at Harry to acknowledge his statement.

Snape rolled up the first document and replaced it on the table.

"We cannot file it until after treatment," he said. "They must still be considered his legal guardians until he is admitted."

"Of course." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Harry, we have asked the Dursleys to rescind their
guardianship of you. As you legally need a guardian in the Magical World until you are seventeen, Professor McGonagall has agreed to take on that responsibility. It is a responsibility sometimes asked of Heads of Houses and she has willingly stepped into the role. However, so as not to delay treatment for your injury, we will not file that paperwork until you have left St. Mungo's." He glanced over at Snape. "Considering your success at working together this summer, I would have liked to have asked Professor Snape to step in instead of Professor McGonagall. However, this would not have been practical at Hogwarts."

Harry could just imagine waiting outside of Snape's office for a lecture on his grades, or receiving a howler in the Great Hall with Snape's voice booming out of it.

Harry reached for the second roll of parchment.

"Can I see it?" he asked. Neither Snape nor Dumbledore stopped him, so he picked up the parchment roll and opened it, scanning it quickly until he came to Uncle Vernon's and Aunt Petunia's signatures. He thought he would feel extremely happy to know that it was official—they had no authority over him any longer. He would never have to return to the Dursleys to live. He didn't really have to ever see them again if he didn't want to. But a part of him felt rather like a rejected orphan, even though in all actuality he'd felt like that for as long as he could remember. Sighing, he re-rolled the document and placed it back on the table beside the first one.

"So, what exactly will change once Professor McGonagall becomes my guardian?" he asked. He understood the legal necessity of the action, but from a practical point, he hadn't had a guardian at Hogwarts ever. No one sent howlers when he got in trouble, no one checked his marks to be sure he wasn't a total waste of space, no one sent him boxes of his favorite treats before final exams to "get him through" the rough spots. Well, Mrs. Weasley remembered him when she sent stuff to Ron, but the Weasleys didn't check up on him to make sure he wasn't skiving off classes or anything.

"Quite a bit will change," answered Dumbledore. Harry caught his sidelong glance at Snape and wondered what that was about. "Any issues with your academic performance or behavior will be directed to her instead of to the Dursleys. She will also be responsible for providing for your physical needs, including clothing and medical care, as well as shelter during the holidays and between the time after sixth year and your seventeenth birthday. The stipend the Dursleys received from your parents' estate will now be directed to Professor McGonagall, to be used, of course, for your needs."

"Wait a minute. What stipend? The Dursleys received money from my parents?"

Snape shot Dumbledore a malevolent look. Dumbledore seemed perplexed.

"Yes, of course. That is a basic provision of guardianship. The guardians normally act as trustees for the ward and monitor his or her estate. However, your parents provisioned their estate such that the bulk of it was reserved for your use once you reached your majority. A much smaller portion was put into a special fund for your needs until you reached the age of 17. This was apportioned to the Dursleys by Gringotts directly on a monthly basis, as directed in your parents' will. The money would not have gone to you directly, Harry, unless they elected to give you a cash allowance. They would have used it to help pay for their housing and utilities, recreation, food and of course your clothing, supplies and toys. In short—your portion of the household expenses along with your personal needs."

Harry was looking at Dumbledore as if he had grown another head. *Don't be angry,* he told himself. *He didn't know. He couldn't have known. He always sees the best in people...he can't help it.* He swallowed and looked up again at the professors. Snape looked like it was costing him a great deal to keep his mouth shut. He glanced at Harry and leaned forward to pick up the scrolls.
"Fortunately," he said, "these documents will assure that the Dursleys don't see another penny of Potter's money. Minerva will see to it that the stipend is used to get him proper clothing and shoes and allow him a suitable monthly allowance for Hogsmeade's visits and school supplies." He handed the scrolls to Dumbledore, who slipped them back into his robe pocket. He turned to Harry. "It is late and we have a long day planned for tomorrow. Perhaps fifteen minutes of journaling will be sufficient this evening. I believe a new topic is in order—however, it is one I will require you to identify. What adjective best describes how you feel now—after learning what you have just learned?"

Harry stared at Snape a moment, realizing the appropriateness of the task he'd assigned. He nodded his understanding and stood, managing to politely bid the Headmaster goodnight before returning to his room. He closed the door and sat on his bed with his journal in his lap. Anger? Disappointment? Fury? Rejection? Bitterness? What did he really feel? Empty, perhaps. It was bad enough that they had treated him like they did but doubly worse that they had been paid to take care of his needs and had still treated him like the Malfoys treated their house elves.

He picked up his charmed quill and started to speak his thoughts out loud. Even with the door closed, he could hear Snape in the front room "talking" to Professor Dumbledore. Someone was enraged on his behalf. Snape was enraged on his behalf and was going head to head with the Headmaster.

Harry smiled. He turned the page of his journal and changed his assignment on the fly. He'd much rather write about how he felt now than how he felt when he'd learned that the Dursleys were using his stipend money to fatten up Dudley some more. But putting a word to the emotion welling up within him was more difficult than he thought. Cherished? Too sappy. Happy? Too generic? Loved? Well, he'd felt loved by some people since he came to Hogwarts.

Finally, he spoke the word aloud and the charmed quill dutifully wrote it out.

"Wanted."

________________________________________

Chapter 33

________________________________________

August 15th

LET IT BE

Snape had breakfast ready when Harry woke the following morning, and he stumbled out to the small kitchen and sat down before a plate of eggs and sausage and a stack of toast. He'd become quite proficient at eating with his left hand only over the past days and made quick work of the eggs by piling them on a piece of toast, capping it with another piece and eating it like a sandwich.

"Did Dumbledore leave in one piece last night?" asked Harry with forced casualness as he buttered a third piece of toast.

Snape grimaced. "Of course. I'd hardly kill my employer, would I?"

Harry swallowed a bite of toast and washed it down with tea. "Thanks for going to bat for me."

"The Headmaster has good intentions," said Snape and Harry thought he was trying, for some reason, to keep Dumbledore in good graces with Harry. "But he is often too much of an innocent,
expecting people—even people like the Dursleys—to walk the higher ground. It is a naïveté uncommon in a man of his age and stature. But it is not excusable."

Harry smiled as he forked a sausage from his plate.

"Will Professor McGonagall take me shopping? For clothes, I mean? I'd really like to get a few things that actually fit me." He hoped he didn't sound whiny or needy.

"Actually, I told the Headmaster we'd take care of that today," said Snape. He looked slightly embarrassed for some reason. Harry, however, brightened.

"You mean in London? Muggle clothes, then?" he asked. Snape nodded, almost painfully, it seemed to Harry. "Wait…did Dumbledore give you money? I don't have enough with me, but maybe we could stop at Gringotts…"

"I have plenty," said Snape. "Minerva can pay me back later if you don't wish me to use my money for your clothing. But you will be purchasing your wizard clothing in Hogsmeade with Professor McGonagall after we return to Hogwarts. Muggle clothing is perfectly fine for informal occasions but you should have appropriate wizard wear as well. You are sixteen now, almost an adult in our world."

They left the flat together thirty minutes later and took the tube to the Westminster Bridge boat pier and boarded a boat for Greenwich. They spent a pleasant morning at the National Maritime Museum, ate an early lunch and returned by boat to the Tower of London. It was mid-August and the tourist season was at its peak, but despite the crowds, Harry quite enjoyed the Beefeater's introductory tour and waited patiently in queue for a glimpse at the crown jewels. The hoards of people seemed to put Snape on edge but it was Harry who suggested they leave and walk across the Tower Bridge. He felt nicely anonymous amid the crowds and they decided to head toward St. Paul's Cathedral, which they had seen and admired from the elevated walkways above the bridge.

"Do you think I can make it up the stairs to the Whispering Gallery?" asked Harry thirty minutes later as they stood under the great dome looking skyward.

"Probably not," said Snape. "However, if you'd like to try, I will accompany you."

An hour later, when they left the cathedral, they had indeed made it up to the Whispering Gallery, as well as down to the crypt where the Duke of Wellington and Horatio Nelson were buried along with a great many dignitaries whose names Harry didn't recognize. They returned to the streets of London and Snape led Harry purposefully down several side streets until they came to a block of mixed retail stores.

Snape started to lay down the rules before they entered the first store. Harry stood outside looking in the window as Snape lectured. The store seemed acceptable enough—men and boy's clothing in a variety of styles and such, a bit on the stuffy side but it could have been a lot worse. They had passed several stores, in fact, that sold the type of clothing you would wear to state dinners or to accept the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Nothing torn or faded, no shirts with lewd or obnoxious sayings or designs, and yes, I shall determine what is lewd and what is not. While Gryffindor colors are appropriate on the Quidditch Pitch, you will hardly want your day to day clothing to be garishly red or gold. Trousers will fit your waist, not hang below it off your hips." He looked disapprovingly across the street at a group of teenagers in very low-slung jeans.

Harry was eying a display of colorful t-shirts obviously targeted for tourists with London-themed
designs and phrases such as "Mind the Gap" and "Look Left." One shirt particularly caught his eye—a picture of the young Prince Harry with the phrase "I Wanna Marry Harry." He wondered what size Ginny would take…

"Absolutely not," said Snape, catching his eye lingering on the t-shirts.

The only experience Harry had with shopping for clothes had been at Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions in Diagon Alley. He bought his school robes and other uniform accessories there, but had never been in a Muggle store dedicated to clothing. Thus, he was rather surprised when he and Snape entered the store and he wasn't immediately accosted by a woman (or a man, for that matter) wielding a measuring tape. Snape moved purposefully over to the section of the store dedicated to casual trousers.

And so it began. Harry was first made to try on several pair of pants to ascertain the correct waist size and inseam. Snape carried on a short but animated conversation with a male attendant regarding the tailoring of specific brands—apparently, he must have been expecting Harry to get taller during the coming year as he was specifically concerned with the trouser hems having extra length to be let out. Shirts were much easier—especially dress shirts—as they seemed to come in sizes based on neck circumference. Harry doubted that that particular measurement would change in the next year unless he Polyjuiced into Goyle again, but after trying on one that Snape decreed fit perfectly, he tugged on the buttoned up collar and asked for the next size larger—just in case he did grow. He tried on casual shirts and t-shirts as well, but his favorite garments by far were the jeans. Putting on a pair of jeans that actually fit was heaven. The ones he chose were pre-washed, comfortable and plain. He got one pair in blue and one in black. Snape pointed him to socks and pants last. Mercifully, he didn't provide input or guidance, nor did he make Harry try anything on. Harry picked out the boxers he preferred in a waist size to match his jeans and trousers. He added a pair of garish socks from the tourist section—in the Union Jack design. Snape opened his mouth to protest but Harry hurriedly explained they were for Dobby. Snape shook his head but didn't comment.

Two jeans, three trousers, two belts (one plain black, one plain brown), two dress shirts, three casual shirts, four t-shirts, 10 pair of boxers, two pair of pajamas and a dozen pair of socks later, Snape's wallet was considerably thinner and Harry was assuring him that he would visit Gringott's and repay him when they went to get his school supplies. Snape hefted one of the two heavy bags, letting Harry manage the second with his good hand, and said "It will be worth every penny when we go back to the flat and incinerate all of your other clothing. Now, one more stop. We may as well get all of this out of the way today."

Harry lifted his shopping bag and followed Snape out of the store and onto the street. It took a great deal of finesse to avoid the Londoners heading for the tube stations on their way home from work, but Harry managed by simply walking directly behind Snape, who seemed to have a real knack for navigating the crowded sidewalks. They walked only a block and a half before Snape ducked inside another store, and Harry found himself surrounded by shoes. Here Snape did insist on Harry being fitted. The attendant admired the boots Harry took off, whistling softly as Harry set them aside. Harry glanced at Snape but the professor's face was impassive and gave away nothing. The socks Harry wore had definitely seen better days. In fact, they'd probably seen better days before Harry had inherited them from Dudley. Snape reached into the shopping bag Harry had placed on the floor beside him and extracted a pair of plain white socks, which he handed to Harry without fanfare. While the attendant retrieved several pair of shoes to try on, Harry changed his socks and Snape unceremoniously tossed the old ones in the rubbish bin.

An hour later, after an uncomfortable ride back to the flat on packed trains with the bulky shopping bags, they ate the leftover Chinese take-out, then Snape started a fire in the fireplace and, after telling Harry to stay put, tossed some Floo powder in and called out "Shell Cottage." He was gone in a
flash of flame but was back within fifteen minutes, holding Harry's school trunk. He dropped it rather unceremoniously on the floor in front of the fire place and bent to open it.

Harry watched as the lid fell back, revealing a tangled mess of clothing, books, parchment and quills. Snape sighed and gave Harry a significant look.

"I will just assume that the trip through the Floo has created this chaos. I will further assume that in the future this trunk will be more orderly. You are no longer a child, Mr. Potter. Take care with your possessions." He passed his wand over the top of the trunk and then lifted it slightly, moving it to the right and pointing to a spot on the floor. At least half the trunk's contents followed the wand, holey socks with stretched out elastic, worn t-shirts, gray pants, jeans with the cuffs rolled up. The robes stayed put, along with a couple of Gryffindor themed t-shirts, his Gryffindor ties, and a hat and pair of mittens Hermione had knitted for him during her knitting craze fourth year.

Snape poked his wand into the bundle of black robes.

"You will need new school robes as well, I take it. You've grown several inches this year. However, as I said this morning, we will let Professor McGonagall take care of that in Hogsmeade. But for now," he said, closing the trunk and scooting it against the wall behind him, "let us dispatch with these."

The magical fire was still blazing in the fireplace but Snape turned toward it and flicked his wand again. Nothing appeared to happen, but when he picked up a pair of Y-fronts with the tip of his wand—a pair Harry had never worn as they looked as if they would fit Professor Slughorn—and tossed them in the fire, the pants gave a satisfying sizzle and disappeared with a crackle and a pop. Harry grinned.

"Be my guest," directed Snape, stepping back and taking a seat on the comfortable wingback chair after turning it to face the fire.

Harry sat down next to the pile of clothes and rummaged through it to pick out a particularly odious sweater in mustard yellow with violet sleeves. He bundled it and tossed it at the fire. It hovered over the flames as if on an invisible force-field for a few seconds then sparked and sizzled and melted in on itself, the sparking reminding Harry of the twins' fireworks at the end of last term. It took surprisingly little time to reduce the clothing to ashes and the experience was whole-heartedly satisfying.

"Wow, thanks," said Harry, standing up.

But apparently, Snape wasn't satisfied yet.

"Accio Dudley Dursley's clothing," he said, pointing his wand toward the hallway. There was an almost immediate pounding and scratching at Harry's bedroom door. Snape shook his head and spoke another spell.

"Alohomora."

The bedroom door swung open and Harry's trainers and the clothing he had worn yesterday shot down the corridor and landed in Snape's lap.

"Any reason you're practically sitting in my lap?" asked Snape a moment later as Harry almost slid across the floor toward him.

"I'm wearing a pair of Dudley's boxers! Cancel the spell!"
Snape smirked. "You may use those for bedding for Hedwig," he said. Harry had forgotten about Hedwig. He went over to her to check her water and give her some owl treats, then opened the window by the perch to let her out to hunt.

After a celebratory Butterbeer, Snape pulled out the chessboard and he and Harry sat down for a game of chess. Snape had brought out only the scar removal cream tonight. "The instructions from St. Mungo's are no potions or other treatments for your arm after noon today. And nothing to drink or eat after midnight in case the nerve stripping is necessary. However, you can use the scar cream as that doesn't affect the nervous system."

As Harry applied the cream with his good left hand, he thought of something that had slipped his mind.

"What's happening with Umbridge? Did Professor Dumbledore mention anything?"

Snape was silent until he completed the move he was contemplating. He continued to study the board as he answered. "A trial is pending. Once the Headmaster opened the inquiry, parents of two other students came forward with similar claims. However, it seems that Dolores has disappeared. I have it on good faith from a friend of mine that she is currently being treated in a Muggle psychiatric ward in a hospital in Wales. As they use shock therapy at this particular institution, the Headmaster has deemed it wise to wait for the Muggles to finish their therapy before retrieving her for trial."

Harry couldn't concentrate on the game with that particular nugget of information in his hands.

"Shock therapy? You're talking about electric shock, right? Like in Frankenstein?"

Snape nodded. Harry didn't pause to wonder how he knew about Frankenstein. "I also spoke to the Headmaster about our experiment. He asked if we had worked with strong emotions or feelings other than pain. I told him we had not. He recommended that we continue our experiment, but with emotions at the other end of the spectrum. I told him we would not experiment further until we had St. Mungo's behind us."

Harry grimaced. Even with the fortuitous delay St. Mungo's offered, he knew where this was going. He distractedly moved a pawn.

"I suppose we should test whether you can feel my passion first," Snape continued. "Fortunately for you, Mr. Potter, I am passionate about many things outside of the bedroom, including potions, ballroom dancing and The Beatles."

Harry stared at him.

"Checkmate, Mr. Potter," said Snape, taking his pawn and leaning back in the chair. "We will be leaving early tomorrow—no later than eight a.m. Pack your pyjamas, toiletries and clothing to wear when you are released."

"Alright," said Harry, sighing. He stood up, his face giving away his nervousness.

"Mr. Potter," said Snape, his voice soft and oddly reassuring. "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" asked Harry, incredulous. He started walking down the corridor but paused as he heard Snape's voice again.

"Whisper words of wisdom, let it be."
To Harry's surprise, Professor Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey and Mrs. Weasley were all at St. Mungo's to meet them when he and Snape walked into the Hyacinth A. Hammerlich Memorial Auror's Ward the next morning. Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were sitting in front of a formidable looking witch at a plain wooden desk, filling out a pile of forms. The witch at the desk was scrutinizing a scroll. Her eyes, behind very large, round, green-framed glasses, flicked over to Snape and Harry as they entered the room and she idly waved her wand at a door across the room. A ball of blue light flew out of the tip of her wand and hovered above the door, where a transom made it visible in the next room.

Mrs. Weasley hurried over to Harry and met him with a comfortable hug. As always, she smelled of cinnamon and tea. Harry returned the hug. It seemed like a very long time since he had seen her at Hogwarts.

"You're looking well, Harry dear," she said. "Looks like you're getting enough sun and enough sleep." She studied him again and frowned at his bound arm. "Except for the arm, of course. But they'll get that all sorted out here, right as rain, right Severus?" She turned to Snape, smiling again and obviously seeking his affirmation.

"Of course, Molly," answered Snape, smoothly. "I have already assured Mr. Potter that the treatment will be successful and he'll be back on a broom playing Quidditch soon after term starts."

"Wait…you didn't say 'soon after' term starts," protested Harry.

"I didn't give you any timeframe at all, did I Mr. Potter?" responded Snape. "I would have thought you'd be overjoyed to be back on a broom as early as September, hmm? After all, wasn't it only last year that you were banned from Quidditch for life?"

Harry rolled his eyes and Snape smirked. Molly looked from one to the other in confusion. Harry thought she had probably expected him to react to Snape's teasing more violently.

"Have you heard from Ron and Ginny, Mrs. Weasley?" asked Harry, changing the topic entirely. While it hadn't yet been three weeks since they'd left with the Grangers for the States, he was more than ready for their return—he had so much to tell them and missed the owls he was accustomed to receiving from them in the summertime.

"Why, yes, yes I have," she answered warmly. "They'll be back home on Tuesday. Ginny and Hermione are having a lovely time, though I think Ron feels rather the odd man out. Didn't like the aeroplane much—wanted to charm the seats bigger and according to Ginny, complained rather loudly about the quality of the food. Embarrassed them all by asking for Butterbeer… But anyway, they're all having a lovely time in Boston but of course" (she was watching Harry's face carefully as she spoke) "would be so much happier if you could be there with them."

Harry didn't get a chance to reply. A mediwizard, dressed in the lime green robes of St Mungo's, had entered the room through the door with the light over it and was eyeing the crowd of people, looking slightly confused. His eyes finally settled on Snape and he hurried over to the small group. Harry
thought that he had decided that Snape was the one person in the group that looked like he could potentially be an Auror. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey, with their distinctive clothing and distinctive ages, were out. He was far too young and Mrs. Weasley, well, Mrs. Weasley looked about as much like an Auror as Hagrid did.

"Healer Gannon," said Snape before the healer could address him. He obviously read the healer's name from the embroidered letters over the breast pocket on the garishly-colored robe. "I am Severus Snape, a Professor at Hogwarts. This is Molly Weasley. We are both here with Mr. Potter, standing in for his Muggle aunt and uncle, who have given permission for his treatment."

The healer shook each of their hands in turn then turned to Harry, his eyebrows practically jumping into his hairline when he connected the name to the face and realized exactly who his patient was.

"I…I wasn't told Mr. Potter would be my patient today. Normally….well, normally I treat Aurors in this ward…" He looked over to the admissions desk and Harry followed his gaze. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were still filling out paperwork—Madam Pomfrey seemed to be consulting a thick stack of parchment in a worn file folder.

"Well, Mr. Potter is clearly not an Auror," replied Snape. "He's going to have to bring up his abysmal Potions marks if he has a prayer of making it into the Auror Corps." He looked significantly at Harry. Harry stared back at him wide-eyed.

"You mean there's even a chance?" he said, stressing the word 'chance' and looking like Christmas had come early instead of like he'd just been grievously insulted. It didn't even occur to him to protest that his potions scores would be a lot higher if Draco Malfoy stopped lobbing volatile ingredients in his cauldron when he had his head turned.

"A glimmer. We will discuss your O.W.L. scores soon—I believe they are due out mid-week. But because of your successful mission with Professor Dumbledore the other night, I'd surmise there is a more than reasonable chance that the minimum score for N.E.W.T. level potions is now an E rather than an O."

Snape then turned back to the mediwizard. "Special arrangements have been made to treat Mr. Potter in this ward. The need for privacy and security is paramount, and he is being treated for a condition often seen in the Auror Corps—nerve damage from prolonged Cruciatus. That damage," he added, as Healer Gannon's eyes locked on Harry's right arm which was still bound tightly to his chest with a sling, "was exacerbated by a serious injury from a Muggle car accident two weeks before."

The healer broke his gaze away from Harry and focused back on Snape and Mrs. Weasley.

"Well then, we can take care of a few preliminary items while Headmaster Dumbledore finishes the admission paperwork." He glanced over at the table where Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey and the Admissions witch were still working, verifying, it seemed to Harry, that it indeed _was_ the Hogwarts Headmaster sitting there. "We won't be able to check Mr. Potter in or do any testing until they complete the paperwork, but we can get his vitals."

He led Harry, with Snape and Mrs. Weasley following, to a small alcove and had Harry step on a scale. He recorded his weight—63 kilos—and then measured and recorded his height.

"168 centimeters," commented Mrs. Weasley. "You've got a few on Ginny now."

Well, that made him feel just great. He was now taller than Ginny.

But Mrs. Weasley was still talking. "I always did think you'd shoot up eventually. Your father was
Harry looked over at Mrs. Weasley. "Was he?" he said. "I didn't know…"

"He and Lupin were nearly the same height," said Snape, his voice neutral. Harry thought Lupin was above average in height, but certainly not a tall man. But Lupin still had several inches on him.

Healer Gannon had handed Harry a cup while they chatted and now pointed to a closed door and unapologetically said "We'll need a urine sample."

Harry reddened as he took the cup, avoiding looking at Snape or Mrs. Weasley. "Just leave the cup on the ledge in there," instructed Healer Gannon. Harry huffed slightly. He'd had physicals before as they were required each year for Quidditch players, but he'd never had one with anyone other than Madam Pomfrey participating. He was just relieved he didn't have to come traipsing back out afterwards, carrying the filled cup and handing it over to Healer Gannon in front of Snape and Mrs. Weasley.

Heart-rate and blood pressure were next, and by the time Healer Gannon had recorded the results in his chart, Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were standing and beckoning Harry over.

"Left wrist," said the Admittance witch crisply. Harry stuck out his arm and a very lightweight metal bracelet looped around his wrist and settled comfortably against his arm. "Basil Fawlty?" He looked up at Snape, who was giving Dumbledore a pointed look.

"Code name while you're in here, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "It's only for the official records—the healers working with you will know who you are."

"But Basil?" hissed Harry. "And Fawlty? Sounds like there's something wrong with me! Like I'm a rejected herb or something."

"It's only for a few days, Basil," said Snape in a "we'll discuss this later" kind of voice. Harry wisely backed off.

Dumbledore rested his good hand on Harry's shoulder. "Unfortunately, Harry, Madam Pomfrey and I must get back to Hogwarts now. The Ministry officials should be finishing the rewarding by Sunday and we are looking forward to having you back with us once they are gone." Harry wondered if he looked as nervous as he felt, for Dumbledore squeezed his shoulder. "All will be well—you are in very good hands here. Mrs. Weasley has agreed to stay here with Professor Snape while you are treated so if you need anything—anything at all—please let one of them know."

Harry glanced over at Snape and Mrs. Weasley as Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey headed over to the Floo. Mrs. Weasley smiled back at him but Snape was watching the mediwizard with narrowed eyes. Harry thought he looked suspicious of the man, and he hoped that Snape didn't recognize him from Death Eater meetings.

"We'll do the first tests in Mr. Potter's room," said the healer and they followed him through the door with the light bulb over it down a short hallway and into a circular chamber with small cubicles around its edges. Each had a curtain, and several were pulled shut. He led Harry into one whose curtain was open and directed him to sit on the bed. Snape and Mrs. Weasley entered the crowded cubicle behind him and both moved to the opposite side of the narrow bed, where two uncomfortable looking straight-back chairs were placed side by side.

"We'll need a blood sample first," said Healer Gannon, taking a small vial out of his robe pocket. There was no needle on the vial, and Harry wondered how wizards extracted blood. Perhaps magic
was used to transfer the blood from his veins to the vial?

But when the healer opened a drawer against the wall and pulled out a small silver dagger-shaped knife, Harry paled.

"I'll numb your arm first, Mr. Potter, so you won't feel…What? What's the matter? Haven't you ever had a blood sample taken before?"

Harry had begun to shake uncontrollably, and Snape was suddenly in front of him, hands resting firmly on his shoulders. "Lie back and close your eyes, Harry. Molly will hold your other hand. I will remain right here." He didn't offer any explanation to the healer, and Harry was grateful. He nodded his head, still unable to think of anything but Wormtail coming at him with the dagger in the graveyard after the Triwizard Tournament, of Wormtail taking his blood—blood of the enemy, forcibly taken—to resurrect Voldemort. Mrs. Weasley had taken his right hand, holding it firmly. He wished he could squeeze back but couldn't manage it with the limited function he currently had. On his other side, Snape had seated himself on the edge of the bed and had placed his arm behind Harry's shoulders. Harry gratefully leaned into Snape and kept his eyes closed. The familiar smell, both smoky and herbal, helped to calm him.

It was over quickly and didn't hurt, but it wasn't fear of pain that had put Harry in this state. He remained reclined on the bed, still wearing his street clothes and new trainers, while Healer Gannon removed the bandages and sling on this right arm and began an examination of the arm itself. Harry relaxed—this was familiar territory. The healer began by running the tip of his wand down the arm from elbow to wrist, much as Snape had done a few days ago. He followed this by a thorough test of strength and range of motion of the arm and all of its joints, and then conducted a sensitivity test using pin-prick like pressure on at least twenty different places on his right arm, followed by a similar test on his left. A floating quill and parchment recorded all the results. Harry did not particularly enjoy the flares of pain that accompanied the motion testing and by the time the healer was finished, wished only for a sandwich, his book and a long nap. Finally, Healer Gannon picked up his wand again.

"One more test and we will be finished," he said briskly. "I'm going to perform a deep scan of your right arm and hand to check for previous injuries that may be contributing to your current problems or that may affect your treatment options." Harry tried to quickly catalog those previous injuries—which arm had the basilisk bitten?—but was distracted as the healer cast the spell with both complex wand movement and complicated Latin wording. An opaque pillow of warmth surrounded Harry's arm, glowing faintly. The quill wrote busily as Healer Gannon moved his wand slowly and the pillow exerted pressure on different areas as they glowed white briefly.

The healer didn't seem satisfied once the white glow had progressively moved from shoulder to fingertips and the test was apparently over. Harry saw him glance at Snape and Mrs. Weasley as he began to repeat the test. Snape's dark eyes were focused on Harry's arm, where the white glow remained on three different areas. Harry stared, transfixed, understanding. He caught Snape's eyes. Snape was frowning.

"Problem?" asked Snape, shortly, as Healer Gannon pocketed his wand and plucked the parchment out of the air.

"Well, yes, frankly there is," he said as he reviewed the notes on the parchment. "You mentioned the Cruciatus, and there is certainly residual damage from that—two times in the last year or so." He looked up to confirm that. Both Snape and Mrs. Weasley were staring at Harry.

" Twice?" said Mrs. Weasley, rather weakly.
It was hard for Harry to believe that it had been little more than a year since the first time he had experienced that curse. "In the graveyard, after the third task," he muttered. He guessed from her reaction that she hadn't been aware of everything he had suffered there.

"From You-Know-Who?" she said faintly. "He was the one who cursed you?"

Harry nodded, looking down at his hands in his lap.

"There is something else?" Snape's voice was soft yet demanding. Though Harry was not looking at any of the adults in the room, he knew Snape was addressing Healer Gannon.

Healer Gannon took out his wand again and muttered a brief spell. "*Malum Ostenus.*"

The back of Harry's hand and two spots on his forearm began to glow brightly and a thin but bright line drew itself from his shoulder to his fingers, splitting in two below his elbow and then radiating out from his wrist to the tip of each finger.

Mrs. Weasley looked confused.

Snape looked vaguely disturbed.

But Harry understood.

He flexed his hand slightly. "The blood quill," he said. He then pointed at the second spot of light. "The basilisk fang."

"Blood quill? What is this…? Severus?"

Snape raised a hand to silence her. "Go on, Harry. The others?"

Harry grimaced. The phoenix tears had healed the spot where the fang had pierced him, leaving him only the memory of the event. The last bright spot, however, covered a scar as well as a memory.

"The graveyard," he said, touching the spot briefly. "This is where Wormtail took the blood to resurrect Voldemort."

All three adults cringed when he spoke the Dark Lord's name. Harry thought Healer Gannon was shaking. He'd probably bolt from the room soon.

Healer Gannon pointed at the line running down the entire arm.

"And this?" His voice definitely shook a bit.

Snape spoke before Harry could.

"Gilderoy Lockhart."

The Healer's eyebrows rose.

"Mr. Potter suffered a bad break to his arm from a cursed bludger during a Quidditch match his second year at Hogwarts. Lockhart attempted to heal the arm but only succeeded in vanishing his bones. They were regrown with Skele-gro."

The healer cancelled the spell and the bright light seemed to drop back into Harry's arm, warming it pleasantly.
"Well, this changes things quite a bit," said the healer. "We are going to have to deal with the residual dark magic before stripping and regrowing the nerves. Get comfortable, Mr. Potter, we're going to have to call in another specialist."

Harry's face had fallen and he scooted backward in the bed until he was sitting with his legs drawn up, leaning against the headboard. Mrs. Weasley pulled her chair in closer to the bed.

Snape gave Harry a sympathetic look before he left the small cubicle purposefully. Harry could hear him exchanging words with the healer, but they must have walked some distance away as the words were muffled and hard to make out.

Harry sighed. He looked over at Mrs. Weasley.

"If I'm still here Tuesday, can Ginny, Ron and Hermione come visit?"

Mrs. Weasley ruffled his hair affectionately. "Tuesday is a long way away. A lot can happen in that time."

Harry had a bad feeling about that.

Chapter 35

August 16th

COMPLICATIONS

When it became apparent that neither Snape nor Healer Gannon would be coming back anytime soon, Mrs. Weasley set her bulky quilted handbag on the bed and proceeded to pull out a worn chess set made of carved stone, a dog-eared deck of Exploding Snap cards and a colorful set of gobstones. She placed them on the bed beside Harry then reached back in and extracted two large hardcover Hogwarts yearbooks, a bottle of ink, a box of facial tissues, several paperback novels (Harry thought they looked suspiciously like the Muggle romances Aunt Petunia was fond of), a quill and a roll of parchment.

"Handy bag, that," commented Harry as she replaced the comb, toothbrush, mirror, wand, pair of gloves, hand towel and bottle of Elven wine she had removed in order to find the other items.

"Infinite expanding charm," she answered proudly. "Doesn't weigh any more than a normal handbag. When Fred and George were little, I carried a pair of Muggle police handcuffs in there along with a Quidditch bat. Did wonders to encourage better behavior in those two."

Harry eyed the mishmash of items on the bed. Something tugged at his heart, something unfamiliar yet comfortable. Is this what it would have been like to have had a mother when he was smaller? Someone who would have not just met his needs, but anticipated them? He brushed the feeling aside as best he could. It wouldn't do to get weepy or worse—Mrs. Weasley might feel compelled to hug him until he couldn't breathe or hold out a facial tissue so he could blow his nose. Instead, he reached for the Exploding Snap cards.

"Are you up for a game?" he asked, shuffling the cards in his hands. The cards had a homey, familiar feel about them.
Mrs. Weasley smiled and pulled her chair closer to Harry's bed. "I used to be quite good at Exploding Snap," she said, smoothing a place on the bed for the cards. "Taught all of my children everything they know about the game."

"Wow, I'm in trouble then," said Harry with a smile for his friends' mother. And he meant it. He'd never been able to beat either Ron or Ginny at Exploding Snap. Fortunately, Hermione was even worse than he was, so he didn't come out on the bottom of the heap every time.

He enjoyed the rounds with Mrs. Weasley immensely. She didn't take it easy on him, but didn't play as cut-throat as Ron and Ginny did. He managed to win a few rounds in the hour that they played, even though he played largely one-handed.

"You must be famished," said Mrs. Weasley, checking her very interesting wristwatch after they finished with the cards and had looked through—and thoroughly enjoyed—one of the two Hogwarts yearbooks she had pulled out of her bag. This one had been from her sixth year—a year before his dad and mum started at Hogwarts. It had been very rewarding to see a photo of Lucius Malfoy with a very serious case of spots.

"I'm not supposed to eat," replied Harry. "Nothing after midnight last night, anyway. And nothing to drink either." But he was famished, and thirsty as well. How long did it take to find a healer who specialized in residual dark magic, anyway? Was this an Auror's ward or wasn't it?

"That's ridiculous—letting you starve while they argue over treatment! I'm going to go find Severus and that healer and find out what's going on. You stay put, Harry. Look at this other yearbook, why don't you?"

Harry took the yearbook Mrs. Weasley held out to him. She stood and left the cubicle, closing the curtain behind her.

When the curtain closed, Harry put the book down, rested his head on the pillow he'd been leaning against and, avoiding the pile of items Mrs. Weasley had left on the bed by curling up around them, closed his eyes. He hadn't wanted her to know how tired he was getting—he'd not slept very well the night before what with worrying about what would happen today. He was asleep within five minutes, ignoring his grumbling stomach. It was inevitable that he'd dream, given the circumstances of the day, the stress he'd been feeling and his empty stomach. The dreams seemed to fade in and out quickly, one scene quickly dissolving into another, and he moved restlessly on the bed in his sleep.

"Left arm please," said the Admission witch in his dream. Dream Harry obediently complied, holding out not one but four thin, black hairy left arms. "Sorry," he said to the witch apologetically, pulling back three of them, "Shouldn't have tried to transform into my Animagus form this soon after eating." "We'll need a blood sample next," said the Dream mediwizard. "Make a fist and we'll take it from the vein near your elbow." "Fist?" said Dream Harry. "How do you make a fist when you're a snake?" He coiled up around himself, looking out at a bemused Snape and an exasperated Molly Weasley through slitted eyes. "Harry, how many times have I told you to cut up your food before eating it?" said Mrs. Weasley, holding up a plate with a dead rat on it. "You'll get indigestion and have disturbing dreams." "Drink the whole thing," said Madam Pomfrey, holding out a potion vial to him. It was marked "Nu-Nerves" and was at least a liter in size. Harry took the bottle and uncorked it. "No, Harry, let me try it first," said Luna. "It might be poisoned." "I've the antidote," said Snape, holding out a bezoar the size of one of Hagrid's rock cakes. "Don't choke on it."

Harry woke to Mrs. Weasley shaking his shoulder. "Harry, dear, wake up now," she was saying as he opened his eyes, disoriented. He hadn't removed his glasses before falling asleep and he rearranged them on his nose, bringing her face into focus.

"I'm off to find you something to eat. Professor Snape would like to talk with you for a few
minutes.” She glanced over toward the cubicle curtain, where Harry saw Snape, looking serious and a trifle irritated, standing in the doorway formed by the separate curtain panels.

"Sure. Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," he said, sitting up and trying to avoid the games and other items on the bed. But Mrs. Weasley was already stuffing things back in her clever handbag, rather nervously, he thought. Harry scooted up into his customary position, pillow at the small of his back, shoulders resting against the headboard, then drew his knees up and wrapped his left arm around them. Mrs. Weasley left with a "I'll be back in a trifle, dear," and Snape sat down in the chair she'd used to play Exploding Snap with Harry, turning it around—as was his custom—and straddling it to face Harry.

"I've half a mind to sign you out now and take you to a hospital in France," he said without preamble. "However, I cannot argue with the diagnosis. The dark magic used to inflict some of the earlier damage has interfered—and will continue to interfere—with your healing. The Administrator of this ward and three healers are currently engaged in a heated debate that unfortunately continues to focus more on how a 16-year-old has managed to accumulate such damage than on how to actually cure it. I have had to call in the Headmaster."

Harry was gazing at his hand and arm, which the healer had left unbandaged and unbound.

"One positive thing has managed to come out of this, though," said Snape with a pleased smile. "Umbridge will definitely go to Azkaban. Healer Gannon has already expedited his report to the Wizengamot. One benefit of having Aurors in your pocket."

Harry grinned. It was the injustice of her claims rather than the pain her torture had caused that riled him the most. But now that he was facing more treatment—likely painful—because of her barbaric blood quill…

"What are they going to do?" he asked. "I mean for my treatment—what are the options?"

"In the last two hours," answered Snape bluntly, not sugar-coating it as Harry was sure Mrs. Weasley would have, "they have discussed removing the skin and the surrounding tissues of your right hand. They have also considered a curse-breaker and a potion that is utterly complex and requires several rare ingredients, including phoenix tears. There are several possible severe side-effects of the potion, but at this point, it seems to me to be the most viable of options."

Harry's stomach, already painful from hunger, knotted.

"What kind of side effects?" he asked, trying to keep his voice casual. Snape looked at him sharply before answering.

"The potion is only effective the first time it is used," said Snape. "If you take it now, it cannot be used effectively again as your body will fight against it after building up antibodies this go around. It is not typically used on someone of your age."

"That's not exactly a side-effect," said Harry, considering the implications.

"No, I suppose it is not," answered Snape. "But it is a very important consideration. The side effects, if you are still interested…?"

Harry nodded reluctantly. He supposed he should hear what he was up against, unpleasant as it might be.

"The most dangerous side effect is that use of the potion may make you more susceptible to damage from future dark curses. I have been working out how to mitigate this effect and may be able to come up with a viable solution."
"Wait…you were already working on this potion? Before they even suggested it?"

Snape looked at him oddly. "No," he answered.

"But you said it's only been two hours! You've worked out a way to get around that side effect in two hours?"

Snape smirked. Harry was certainly getting used to that look on his professor's face. He tapped himself on the chest twice. "Severus Snape, passionate about potions, remember?" he answered.

Harry rolled his eyes. He found himself doing that more and more after one of Snape's smirks. "Right. But you said there were several severe side-effects?"

Snape sombered. He clearly did not like discussing the topic. "In this case, only two that are worth noting. The first I have already described. The second is pain—pain that cannot be controlled or lessened with potions or other means. The potion in essence undoes the original damage and in so doing evokes the original pain."

Harry paled. Even the remembered shadow of the pain that had caused those injuries was nearly intolerable. Snape was eyeing him closely. "Wow." He thought a moment then looked over at Snape again.

"You mentioned other options? A curse breaker?"

"Yes, that…and removing the skin and other tissue on the back of your hand—the area that the healer is most concerned with. The other injuries are less severe and less intrusive. The phoenix tears erased most of the residual curse damage from the basilisk bite. The cursed bludger that broke your arm was not particularly dark—House Elf magic is hard to classify and the fact that it appeared at all in the scan was surprising. As for the knife wound…it is localized and not too deep. However, Healer Gannon's report notes catalogued some more damage to your hand and fingers that we didn't notice earlier as the damage was to the other side of your hand. Do you recall another injury? Exposure to dark magic of any type?"

"Quirrell," replied Harry dully. "End of first year. I…I touched his face…there at the end. And it cracked and turned to…to dust, I guess."

"Harry, I know this is not pleasant—bringing up all of these memories in a single day—but they must be dealt with and the damage mitigated. You do realize, don't you, that damage inflicted to you directly or indirectly by the Dark Lord himself will affect you more because of your shared connection? And will be more difficult to heal?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess so." He noted that Snape didn't chastise him for shrugging. It was one of his most ingrained coping mechanisms and very difficult to break.

"Quirrell was hosting the Dark Lord," continued Snape resignedly. "I think there is no other option than using the potion at this point. We cannot simply remove all the skin and flesh of your hand."

"What about a curse breaker?" tried Harry, more than a little hesitant about ingesting a potion that might make him more susceptible to damage from dark magic, not to mention one that would cause him a great deal of pain. "Bill Weasley's a curse breaker. He works for Gringotts. And he's in the Order of the Phoenix too. Perhaps he could…"

He tapered off. The look on Snape's face told him it was a dead end.

"More than anything else, I am concerned about the time element. The curses have to be identified
and lifted individually, perhaps by different curse breakers. Success or failure is also hard to judge immediately. If we had more time, it would be a more viable option. But classes start in two weeks, Harry."

Harry was about to argue that he could postpone treatment until Christmas holiday, or extend it over several months using the curse breakers, but he closed his mouth once he remembered Quidditch. He sighed heavily just as Mrs. Weasley came back into the cubicle carrying a tray loaded with food. Even Snape's eyebrows shot up upon seeing the sheer quantity on the tray.

"Mr. Potter's height and weight were fairly proportional, Molly," he commented dryly. "Additional food will not make him taller. Or are you planning to feed Hagrid too?"

Harry hid a snicker behind his hand as Mrs. Weasley shot Snape a disapproving look and hovered the tray in front of him. Her hover charm was nearly perfect—the tray was level and secure, almost as if it had feet securing it in place. He supposed she'd had lots of practice with seven children all getting sick from time to time. He eyed the contents of the tray with approval.

"Wow. This looks good. Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," he said, looking up at her with a genuine smile. He picked up a corned beef sandwich and began to eat it.

"I thought you'd like corned beef," she said. She turned to Severus. "My Ron loves corned beef, you know."

Snape gave a disinterested "humpth" and Harry nodded as he swallowed a large bite of sandwich and washed it down with cold pumpkin juice. Ron hated corned beef, but he wasn't about to point that out to Mrs. Weasley. Harry finished the first sandwich and started another, finished that and began alternating pieces of fresh cut-up fruit with spoonfuls of chicken soup.

"He did eat last night, Molly," stated Snape as he watched Harry work through his very generous lunch. Harry caught the look Molly gave him—an "I told you so" sort of look—and smiled as he started on his dessert.

"I saw the Headmaster," she said to Snape a few minutes later as she picked up the nearly empty tray. "Is there a problem?"

"There is always a problem when it comes to Mr. Potter," sighed Snape. "Healer Gannon called in the ward administrator to discuss exactly how Mr. Potter received so much curse damage in his short life. As accusations started to fly, I sent my Patronus to Albus and he Flooed in. His gaze drifted out to the central area outside the curtains. "Here he is now," he said, stepping aside quickly as Albus Dumbledore appeared in the curtained doorway.

"We have cleared up the concerns regarding Harry's history," he said directly. "And we have discussed treatment options. Healer Gannon brought up the issue of the residual curse damage to the fingers and hand—I believe I am correct in assuming that was from Professor Quirrell?" He looked toward Harry as he asked, meeting Harry's nervous green eyes with his own.

"Professor Snape already asked me about it and that's the only thing I could think of," answered Harry. "I told him about what happened…to Professor Quirrell…when I touched him." He swallowed the bile in his throat. He still hated thinking about that day.

Dumbledore looked over at Snape. "The potion, then, is the only option as far as I am concerned. I have secured permission for you to use the laboratory here. They have asked about ingredients—Healer Fiscus confirmed that they do have all the ingredients needed in stock but seemed to think you might prefer to find more fresh…"
"The potion will be most effective if the phoenix tears, dragon blood and squid ink are fresh—gathered within twenty-four hours of brewing. I have some of the other ingredients in my stores at Hogwarts and will gather them directly—at least I can attest to their age and source."

"Fine. You should come to Hogwarts then and get all that you need. How long will it take you to brew the potion?" asked Dumbledore.

"Four to six hours of prep time and six hours to brew," answered Snape. "It is not one I have attempted before…"

"I have every confidence in you, Severus," interrupted Dumbledore. Harry echoed that sentiment silently. He was relieved that Snape would be making the potion. "You can start this afternoon, then?"

Snape nodded.

"Then I will request fresh tears from Fawkes—he is close to a burning so I had best be quick about it. May I ask Hagrid to collect the ink from the giant squid?"

"That would be satisfactory," replied Snape. He turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Molly, could you prevail upon your son to provide a vial of fresh dragon blood?"

"Of course, Severus," said Mrs. Weasley. "I'll go Floo call the preserve now. I don't see why he couldn't get it back to us by this evening."

Dumbledore bid Harry a quick goodbye then he and Snape walked out of the cubicle and conferred briefly before Snape came back in alone. As soon as Snape was back inside, Mrs. Weasley left to Floo Charlie.

"Ask him to get if from Norbert!" Harry called after Mrs. Weasley. She stuck her head back in, looking confused. "Norbert. It's a dragon in his preserve—used to belong to Hagrid," he explained.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, shaking her head and muttering "Norbert!"

Harry turned to Snape. "Do I have to stay tonight, then?" he asked, wishing they could return to Shell Cottage, or at least to the flat in London, instead of staying in St. Mungo's. The Auror's Ward lacked the hustle and bustle of a normal hospital. He had yet to see a nurse of any kind and everything in the ward was oddly still and quiet.

Snape grimaced. "Well, seeing as I'm staying tonight—yes, you will have to stay here. You can help me with the potion, in fact. No need for you to lie about all day."

Somehow, the looming fear of potion treatment was easier to stomach with something to do and with the knowledge that Snape himself would be in charge of brewing it.

"How long will the potion take to work?" he asked as he and Snape left the cubicle together to check out the laboratory in the Auror's Ward.

"I hope to speed up the potion's effect," answered Snape, by way of a non-answer. "Probably no more than a few hours in total—if I am successful, that is."

"And if you're not?" asked Harry. "How long does it normally take?"

"As long as it took for the curse to be inflicted," said Snape somberly.
Harry stopped abruptly in the corridor and stared at him.

"But I told you… I told you I had detentions nearly every night for two weeks!"

"I know, Mr. Potter. I could not forget that conversation if I tried." Harry and Snape locked eyes for a long moment.

Harry hoped he did not look as horrified and scared as he felt. He felt a hand on his shoulder as he and Snape continued to walk down the hallway back toward the Admissions Desk.

"Severus Snape, passionate about potions, remember?" he said. "Trust me, Harry."

Harry nodded as he felt Snape's arm go around his shoulders and pull him toward him briefly. Snape released him quickly and they continued to walk down the hallway side by side. Harry smiled. For Severus Snape, that was as good as a hug

Chapter 36

August 16th – 17th

TREATMENT

For the first time in his life, Harry enjoyed Potions.

Tedious hours of cutting, mincing, dicing, cubing, desiccating, pulverizing, weighing, measuring, blending and stewing followed by precisely timed and orchestrated brewing… Harry could, for the first time, truly appreciate that Potions was an art form based on a firm foundation of science and magic.

"Why so much peppermint?" he asked as he cut the leaves into very fine strips.

"Settles the stomach," answered Snape. "You know that, already, Harry. Think."

Harry grinned. The further they got into this night, the more often Snape called him Harry.

He slept on a cot Snape transfigured during the wee hours of the morning, when the preparation was finally completed and the brewing was underway. Curled up on his side, he imagined he was smaller, younger, comforted by the sounds of quiet work surrounding him.

To his very great surprise, Bill Weasley was there working with Snape when he next opened his eyes. He was sitting on a chair close to the cauldron. As Harry watched, he stirred the potion twice, counter-clockwise. Harry watched him for a few minutes. Bill's hair was loose on his shoulders and his shirt sleeves were pushed back past his elbows. For the first time, Harry noticed the tattoo around Bill's wrist. It looked like a circlet of small, intertwined runes and was set directly behind the wrist bone. A muffled snore drew Harry's attention to a second cot in the room. Snape was stretched out on it, uncovered, sleeping on his side with one hand almost brushing the floor. Harry's eyes closed again.

Quiet voices woke him hours later. Squinting, he could make out Snape and Bill standing next to the cauldron. Snape appeared to be decanting the potion and Bill was cleaning the preparation area.

"Mom should be back in an hour or so," Bill was saying. "Who else do you have lined up?"
Lined up? What were they talking about?

Snape had pushed a cork into a bottle and was working on a second one. "Lupin, of course," he answered. "And Minerva is fetching Ms. Lovegood around noon if he isn't through it by then."

"Xenophilius' daughter?" asked Bill. "That Lovegood?"

Snape chuckled. "Could there be another?"

"A bit off his rocker, that one," answered Bill. "Bet the daughter has had a rough time of it, losing her mother like that. She must be a close friend, then? Of Harry?"

Harry made sure his eyes were shut. He didn't want to be caught listening to this conversation and knew he should just give it up and go back to sleep. From the way Bill and Snape were talking, he was in for a rough day.

Snape's low voice floated across the room to Harry before he drifted off again. "She seems to have become a friend of the entire Gryffindor group this past year—hard as it is to admit, she's better off for it. Harry thinks highly of her—she was one of only a few people that appeared in his first sea dream."

Harry heard Bill's surprised "hmph" but nothing else. He couldn't have been sleeping long at all before someone was shaking him lightly by the shoulder.

"Wake up, Harry." He groggily opened his eyes and found Mrs. Weasley bending down next to him. She handed him his glasses, which someone must have taken from his face when he fell asleep. He glanced around but the potions lab was empty. "We just need to walk back down to your room, love. Severus and Healer Gannon are getting things ready down there now."

Harry sat up and turned to put his feet on the floor. He was still fully dressed down to his trainers and he felt decidedly grubby.

"Any chance I can shower first?" he asked Mrs. Weasley as he stood up. He had to use the loo too but didn't want to announce that to Mrs. Weasley.

"Of course, dear," she answered. "That's a very good idea, in fact. All your things are back in your room, I suppose?"

They walked together back toward the Auror's Ward cubicles. Today, only one other curtain was pulled closed, the rest standing open to reveal identical beds, tables and cabinets. Snape and Healer Gannon, along with two other healers—a foreign looking man with a long pointed beard and a middle-aged woman with rhinestone-studded cat's eye glasses—were standing around a tall counter in the middle of the common area.

"Harry is going to have a quick shower," said Mrs. Weasley as Harry fetched his bag from his cubicle.

He felt immensely better physically after his shower, though it couldn't erase the sick and apprehensive feeling he had inside. Snape had stuck his head in the shower room and directed him to put on his pyjamas and robe when he was finished and a few minutes later, Harry heard the door open and close again. When he came out of the shower to dress, a new pair of slippers—moccasin style with warm padded liners—had appeared with his other clothes. He slid them on, forgoing socks, and padded back to his bed, pretending the three mediwizards and Severus had not all stopped talking and were not all standing there staring at him as he walked by.
Surprisingly, Mrs. Weasley wasn’t in his room. He shoved his bag on the countertop on the edge of the curtained area and pulled down the bed’s covers. Even though he'd slept last night, the clean, cool white sheets were inviting and he thought briefly of his luxury-liner of a waterbed back at Shell Cottage. He was really starting to miss his days there and hoped he still remembered how to meditate and pull himself into his occluded state when they were done at St. Mungo’s.

He was still eying the bed when Snape appeared at the doorway.

"Ready?" Snape asked, indicating the bed.

Harry sat down and pulled his legs in, settling against the headboard. Snape walked over to the foot of the bed and rested his hands on the short foot board there. He looked very tired. Harry could see the beginnings of puffy bags under his eyes, stark looking against Snape's pale skin.

"I suggested that you occlude and then have the potion spelled into your system," he began. "I had hoped that would spare you from experiencing the pain again. However, the healers will not allow this. They have made it abundantly clear that your vitals must be closely monitored during the process, and that occlusion may mask respiratory or other problems such as elevated blood pressure or rapid heartbeat potentially caused by the potion."

Harry pulled his knees up a little closer to his chest. "Do you know how long it will last?" he asked.

Snape opened his mouth, closed it again, paused. Finally, he shook his head. "No, I must admit I do not know. I have done what I could to alter the composition of the potion in order to hasten the desired end result. Unfortunately, we did not have time to test it or a willing subject to test it on. I believe that start to finish we are likely looking at eight hours, as I hope to have achieved a two-thirds reduction in the treatment time. My guess is that you had at least twenty-four hours of lines with the Blood Quill—Minerva looked up the detention logs last night.” He paused, looking significantly at Harry. "It made her physically ill—she'll have Umbridge's soul if the Dementor's don't get it first."

Harry raised his gaze from his knees up to Snape.

"I'll be awake the whole time, right?"

"Yes, though there is always the chance you will lose consciousness."

He didn't say 'from the pain' but Harry didn't need to hear the words.

"Someone will be in here? Someone I know?"

"Of course. We have that covered," replied Snape.

Harry looked up at Snape again, willing him to understand what he needed. Despite the progress they had made these last weeks, he was still unable to ask.

Snape stared at Harry for a long moment.

"I will be in the room as long as I am able, Harry, even if someone else is here as well.” He nodded as Harry settled back into the pillows, then turned and left the room.

Fifteen minutes later the monitoring charms were in place, Harry's arm was secured in a binding spell that kept the elbow straight and the palm facing down and Healer Gannon was seated at the foot of the bed with his wand in hand and floating quill and parchment hovering at his left shoulder. Snape held a single vial of potion, dark green in color, and a glass of water.
"All in one go," he said to Harry as he handed him the potion. Harry took it with his left hand and held it to his lips, tipping it up and into his mouth. He grimaced slightly at the taste but swallowed quickly. Snape took the bottle back from him and handed him the water.

"Chaser," said Harry, trying to grin. He drank it down in several gulps and handed the glass back to Snape.

"Reverse order," said Snape. "Which means you will feel the effects of the Blood Quill first." As if on cue, Harry's face contorted and he cried out. All eyes traveled down to his hand where an odd puff of red smoke had just escaped the faint *I must not tell lies* scar. The puffs continued quickly, the smoke proving to be a very fine mist of blood. Harry managed not to cry out with every puff, which he soon came to realize represented a single line he had written with the Blood Quill. He pushed his head back into the pillows. His face had a permanent grimace and his left hand clenched and unclenched in sympathetic pain. Fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes. Forty-five. Mrs. Weasley had come back into the room, intending to relieve Snape, but he waved her into a chair on the other side of the bed. An hour and there had been no let up to the pace of the puffs of bloody mist. Healer Gannon was still standing in the same spot.

"Another hour of this and he'll need a blood replenishing potion," he said.

"I anticipate eight hours," ground out Snape. "I told you that before we began this process."

"You didn't mention he'd be bleeding out," replied Healer Gannon, managing to sound professional through the criticism. Harry hoped he wasn't really bleeding out—that sounded rather ominous—but currently he didn't really care about anything other than trying to breathe through the stabbing feel of the quill in his skin.

Snape and Mrs. Weasley traded places after the first blood-replenishing potion, which Harry gagged down, only half aware of what he was doing. He felt the glass of water at his lips and gratefully took a few swallows. When Mrs. Weasley pulled a cool cloth out of her bag a moment later and wiped his sweaty forehead, he leaned into her touch. She pushed the damp fringe back from his eyes and wiped his head again before resting the cloth there. Harry closed his eyes. It felt unbelievably wonderful to have a small spot of comfort while his hand continued to ache and burn.

He was sinking into a warm cocoon, unconsciously heading toward the womb-space of his occluded world, when Snape's voice brought him back to full awareness.

"Molly, go fetch Albus, please. Ask him to come at once." Snape's voice was terse. He pushed the comforting cloth off of Harry's forehead. Harry forced his eyes open.

"What is it Severus? He's been doing very well, considering…"

But Healer Gannon understood. "Oh sweet Merlin," he whispered. "The scar. We forgot about the scar."

"Wait…" Harry was trying to sit up now, struggling against Snape's heavy hand on his forehead. He groaned as a particularly sharp pain bit into his right hand. His left hand sought the scar on his forehead—all that was left of the most horrific act of dark magic possible. His eyes, staring straight up, met Snape's, staring straight down.

"It's just my arm, right?" he said, pleading with Snape. "The potion is just for my arm…"

Snape shook his head minutely. Harry would have thought he was holding together very well if he hadn't heard his voice—thin and tight, rough with both emotion and lack of sleep.
"It was a general potion, Harry, ingested and distributed throughout your body through your bloodstream. It will go after all residual dark magic in your body… all of it."

Harry clearly saw Mrs. Weasley, by now near the cubicle's curtained entrance, put a hand to her mouth before ducking out to fetch Dumbledore.

_Puff._ Another fine red mist hovered over Harry's hand.

"'s alright," he said, still looking up at Snape's shadowed face. He half-grinned, remembering Snape's words of comfort. "That which does not kill us makes us stronger," he repeated.

He didn't understand Snape's sudden smile. But then, he was just repeating Snape. He wasn't thinking about exactly what those words meant when it came to the Boy Who Lived.

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Chapter 37

________________________________________

August 17th

THE UNEXPECTED

When Dumbledore entered the room twenty minutes later, his robes fanning out behind him in a very Snape-like manner, Harry lay curled on his left side. Mrs. Weasley was stroking his hair as he breathed through the continuing pain in his right hand. Snape had seated himself on the bed behind Harry. He would rest his hand on Harry's shoulder occasionally, and though the touch was rather awkward, Harry appreciated the reminder that he was there.

"Headmaster!" Surprisingly, it was Healer Gannon who got the first words in. Harry rolled over onto his back. The Headmaster was staring transfixed at Harry's hand where a small cloud of red mist had just erupted and was spraying the coverlet with tiny red spots.

"The potion seems to be working the dark magic out through the scar from the Blood Quill," explained Snape. He stood up and both he and Healer Gannon began to apologize at the same time for completely missing the obvious fact that Harry had another curse scar that could be affected by the treatment.

"Headmaster, I cannot explain why we did not consider…"

"Albus, I take full responsibility…"

As Harry watched, the Headmaster lifted his left hand to silence the healer and his Potions Master.

"Enough. I was fully aware of the planned treatment and this complication did not occur to me either. We were focused on Harry's arm and hand and simply did not consider the ramifications of his earlier exposure to the Killing Curse." Dumbledore approached the bed without another word to either of the men. Mrs. Weasley stood and made room for him and Dumbledore took the chair she had just vacated.

"How are you holding up, Harry?" he asked. He brought his left hand up to Harry's face and brushed back his fringe, observing the lightning bolt scar. His touch was light and somehow calming, despite the odd tingling that passed through his scar as Dumbledore's fingers grazed over it.
"I've been better, sir," he answered honestly, gritting his teeth as his hand throbbed again and more red mist puffed into the air.

The Headmaster looked into Harry's eyes over the tops of his half-moon spectacles. His eyes were bright and serious today.

"I deeply regret that you have to endure this, Harry. I'm afraid this whole summer had gotten quite complicated for you. We'll get this sorted out in a trice, right gentlemen?" Dumbledore stood and turned to face Snape as Mrs. Weasley slid back into her chair.

"Severus, do you anticipate a similar effect when the potion goes after the scar on Harry's forehead?" He indicated Harry's hand, which was still puffing out red mist almost rhythmically. "What is your chief concern? Do you believe his life is in danger?"

Harry caught the quick glance Snape gave him before answering.

"No, I do not believe so. I am afraid that the pain may be debilitating as the potion begins to work. Look at his hand." Everyone looked at his hand, even though they'd all been watching it already for nearly three hours. "That curse damage was caused over nearly 24 hours, if the school records are accurate. But the Killing Curse caused the scar on his head. No one—and I repeat—no one—with the possible exception of Mr. Potter himself—knows what kind of pain accompanies that curse."

Dumbledore looked skyward a moment, appearing to be lost in thought. He grasped his right wrist with his left hand and settled them both against his abdomen, contemplating.

"Will the potion be able to remove the residual curse damage, Severus?" he asked at last.

Once more, Severus looked at Harry before answering. "No, I think not. The Killing Curse doesn't typically leave a victim capable of swallowing a potion. The residual damage is usually contained in a corpse." Mrs. Weasley visibly flinched at the statement but Healer Gannon looked far too intrigued for Harry's comfort. But Snape was continuing. "The potion has never been tested against a curse of that caliber. My suspicion is that the potion will attempt to tackle the damage as it is generally intended to do—in the same increments as it was delivered originally." He looked down at Harry's hand again and all eyes followed. Harry's left hand was now wrapped around his right wrist, squeezing tightly.

"So," said Dumbledore a moment later after three more wispy puffs of red mist had settled. Harry was suddenly reminded of the puffing silver instruments in Dumbledore's office, but in his current state couldn't manage the guilt he normally felt at the reminder of the destruction he had wrought there. Mrs. Weasley did another "Scourgify"—she'd been keeping after the settling blood most religiously—as Dumbledore continued. "So, we should expect a terrific burst of healing magic, more or less equal in intensity to the shock of the killing curse, but in reverse?"

This time, Snape and Healer Gannon exchanged a glance, but Snape was the one who answered.

"Headmaster...Albus...Harry said something a little while ago, before you arrived. He was repeating something that I said to him two nights ago. Actually, I believe he may have been poking fun at me..." his gaze wandered over to Harry for a moment. "It is an oft-repeated quotation by Friedrich Nietzsche – 'that which does not kill us...'"

"Makes us stronger," murmured Dumbledore and Snape together.

"Are you implying, then, that this treatment—if it does not kill him—will make him stronger?" asked Dumbledore bluntly. "That it will somehow end the connection?" Harry's eyes widened at the direct
language but he was somewhat pacified to know that Dumbledore's interpretation matched his own.

Snape's answer surprised him.

"Not at all. That might be the case if the potion were able to totally eradicate the effects of the killing curse—the scar, the attendant link to the Dark Lord…" Snape paused and turned quickly to Healer Gannon. "You did NOT hear that," he said, his voice low and menacing. Healer Gannon's eyes widened but he nodded his head in acceptance. "But the potion simply is not—cannot be—strong enough. Mr. Potter's reminder of this axiom made me realize that the original curse did not kill him…"

"You needed a reminder of that, Severus?" asked Dumbledore gently.

Snape looked half annoyed, half amused. "As I was saying," he stated, "the original curse did not kill him. In many ways, it may indeed have made him stronger. Stronger in ways that will help him now and in the coming fight. He is able to resist the Imperius Curse, for example." Snape stopped again and turned toward Healer Gannon.

"I know, I know. Didn't hear that one either," said the healer with a small smile.

"He is a natural Occlumens," Snape continued. "He was able to sustain nearly daily use of the Blood Quill for a two-week period without losing his mind. His defensive spells are his strongest—Expelliarmus, for example. His Patronus is not only corporeal, but larger than life and quite distinct. I am suggesting, Albus," here Snape turned his entire attention to the Headmaster, and everyone else in the room, Harry included, shifted their gazes to Dumbledore, "that Harry Potter has resistive and defensive powers beyond the scope and ability not only of other wizards and witches his age, but of almost all wizards and witches."

Snape fell silent. The room stayed silent. Red mist rose and fell from Harry's right hand several times. Harry's grip on his own right wrist tightened. Finally, Harry spoke.

"But what does that mean?" He released his wrist and touched his forehead, brushing back his fringe and exposing his scar. His hair was damp, his forehead sweaty and creased with the clear evidence of an already long and tense day.

It was Dumbledore who answered. "If, as Professor Snape suggests, your defensive powers were enhanced by the original killing curse—or, more precisely, by the fact that you did not succumb to it—your body may perceive the potion's attempt to remove that curse as an attack, and your magic will resist the attempt to remove it. All in all, I believe this is good news."

"Then why hasn't it been resisting the other curse damage?" asked Harry. He had burrowed back into the pillows—Mrs. Weasley had added another plump one to the standard hospital issue an hour ago, pulling it out of her bottomless handbag with a satisfied smile.

Snape looked thoughtful. Healer Gannon looked intrigued. Snape finally pulled a straight back chair over, flipped it around and straddled it, leaning forward and facing the others.

"We must think this through thoroughly, and in the end, we will still not be sure what will happen if the potion locates the killing curse damage and begins to work to expel it. Healer Gannon, we will need to know promptly when the potion's effects move from his hand. It should progress to the two spots on his arm, return to his fingers and from there…"

Healer Gannon nodded, glancing at the parchment beneath the hovering quill.

"First, consider the potion. The potion is designed to locate and reverse residual damage to the flesh,
muscles, connective tissues and bones caused by dark magic or cursed objects. The potion has been used for more than a century in circumstances similar to this one—where the patient has received a new injury that does not heal or that worsens due to the effect of the residual dark magic at or near the site of the injury. The potion contains a temporal agent, locating and healing the newest damage first then progressing backwards to older injuries, in reverse order of when they were received."

"Like Priori Incantatem," commented Harry, shifting on the bed. Mrs. Weasley began to rub his back between his shoulder blades, making him want to purr and groan at the same time.

Snape fixed him with a stare. "Precisely," he said softly. Harry wondered, for a moment, if Snape knew about his experience with that particular spell in the graveyard after the third task of the Triwizard Tournament. He mentally removed it from his "things to discuss with Snape one day" list.

"Go on, Severus," said Dumbledore. He waved his wand, silently conjuring a sturdy looking padded chair, and settled down into it.

"In order to work effectively, the potion must know what it is looking for. It—more precisely, the magic it delivers—must be stronger than the original curse. Residual curse damage is not so much damage as it is remnants of dark magic that prevent healing. The potion seeks out this dark magic, overpowers it and expels it."

Dumbledore spoke now. He was facing Harry, but at an angle, and Harry could see a strange light in his eye. From this angle, Harry could see that his beard was tied with what looked like the string from a pair of the Weasley Twins' Extendible Ears.

"What you are saying, Severus, is that the potion will not be effective against the damage from the Killing Curse. It was never intended, thus never customized, to repair damage inflicted by the Killing Curse because simply put, no one survives the Killing Curse." Here he, and everyone else in the room, paused to look significantly at Harry as if, thought Harry, they were in a bad Muggle TV drama. Dumbledore continued. "The curative magic delivered by the potion may or may not recognize the damage at all. If it does, it will not be strong enough to eradicate it. But what will it do?"

Healer Gannon was eying the chart and spoke up before Snape could answer.

"Another blood replenishing potion, I think." He left the cubicle to fetch the potion.

"The potion will attempt to force the curse out and Mr. Potter will experience the original pain in some unknown increment. My assumption is that the potion will fail when it attempts to push out the dark magic. What I do not know, and cannot guess, is how much of a struggle it will be—in essence, how long it will try." He stood again as Healer Gannon entered with Harry's second blood replenishing potion. "No matter the outcome, I suggest we allow the boy a good night's sleep before continuing this process and working on regenerating his damaged nerves."

Harry silently agreed. Here, here! he cheered mentally as Mrs. Weasley helped him sit up against the pillows so he could take the potion. He gagged it down—the potion had a distinct metallic taste—wiping the side of his mouth clumsily with the back of his left hand. He handed the bottle back to Mrs. Weasley, then slid down until he was reclining nearly flat. He let the fluffy pillow balloon around his head—it gave him the fleeting illusion that he was back in his water bubble again.

"Let me see if I have this all straight." He looked at Dumbledore, then over at Snape. Somehow, taking control of the conversation like this, made the constant stinging burn in his hand less distinct.

Snape nodded and Dumbledore said "Go on, Harry."
"I'm not going to die. The potion is probably going to attack the dark magic left from the Killing Curse but it won't be strong enough to get rid of it. It's going to hurt a lot. So far so good?"

Snape's mouth was twisted into an odd grimace. If Harry hadn't known better, he'd have thought he was trying to hide a smile.

"That which didn't kill me—the Killing Curse—somehow made me stronger. It's showing itself in my defensive skills. You were worried that my natural defenses might think the potion was attacking me—when it attacked the dark magic in me—but that's not the case or it wouldn't be working now, on my hand."

Now Dumbledore had that funny look on his face. He looked like he was suffering from a mild case of gas.

"So it looks like what we've learned," he continued, "is that even though no one realized the potion might affect my scar, I'm probably going to end up just exactly where I started with my old scar—except that now we know why my defensive skills are good."

"No—it changes everything," said Snape. "You don't see it, do you?" His voice had a timbre, an excited quality, Harry had never heard in it before. It was as if all had been suddenly made clear to him, as if he no longer had to flounder about looking for the right way through in a tangled maze of possible paths.

"Harry, you will win by defense, not by offence. You will defeat him by protecting what you love."

Harry stared at Snape, trying to digest what he said. Dumbledore had said that the power Harry had, the power Voldemort did not understand, was love. He never had understood how love could defeat the Dark Lord, but now, at this moment, he understood what he was capable of in protecting those he loved. Harry felt as if he were in another reality, a reality where Professor Snape smiled triumphantly at Professor Dumbledore, where Professor Dumbledore's eyes sparkled warmly and he smiled broadly at Snape, where tears fell down Mrs. Weasley's cheeks and she kissed him on the forehead and combed his hair back from his sweaty forehead. It felt like a celebration—like they had already won—and for a moment he forgot that Voldemort was far from dead, and that he was in the Auror's Ward of St. Mungo's, and that his hand was puffing mists of blood.

But suddenly, he was flung back into reality. He let out a loud groan, trying to strangle it, as a particulary strong pain spasmed through his right hand and a much larger than usual red cloud hovered over his hand. As the mist settled over his now scar-less hand, he looked up at Healer Gannon, who had begun to quickly scan the hovering chart, then grabbed his forearm as a sharp pain pierced his skin. A stream of blood spurted out. His mouth dropped open as blood drops settled on Mrs. Weasley's sweater. With almost no pause, a second piercing pain, much worse than the first, hit him and another stream of blood followed.

"Basilisk," he muttered, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

A quick blow from the cursed bludger, a flaming pain across his palm and fingers that lasted several minutes and while his right hand spasmed despite the demobilization spell, Snape and Mrs. Weasley were pinning his shoulders to the bed while Healer Gannon threw himself down over his legs as he began to convulse. But Dumbledore, Dumbledore locked eyes with Harry very deliberately as the pain began, blossoming from a prickling tickle to a stabbing blade to a screaming torrent. He tried to close his eyes against it, but Dumbledore's gaze seemed to hold them open.

But he was looking at Dumbledore with other eyes, eyes he'd seen out of before. Dumbledore looked worn and frail, not powerful, not even good. He was an old, twisted man, spent and useless.
A surge of evil power seemed to shoot through him but Dumbledore kept his eyes locked on Harry's and they pushed with an unknown force and suddenly, Harry saw the good man, the powerful wizard, the champion of humanity. He slumped, boneless and panting, back on the pillows, eyes still locked with Dumbledore's.

"What was that? What the hell was that?" he panted.

But Dumbledore was faltering, stumbling as he tried to stand again. Snape let go of Harry and moved quickly to push the Headmaster back into his conjured chair, crouching down in front of him. Healer Gannon took Snape's place, scanned Harry quickly with his wand and cast a whispered spell.

Harry tried to fight the sleeping spell, but he was too exhausted to muster any real resistance. The last thing he heard was Snape's voice, quiet but demanding.

"What the boy said, Albus. What the hell was that?"

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Chapter 38

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August 18th

CHANNELING VOLDEMORT, CHANNELING JOHN

Harry awoke to the sound of two people speaking to each other from opposite sides of his bed.

"Four hours. The spell should be wearing off soon."

That was Snape's voice. Harry tried to open his eyes but his eyelids seemed glued shut. When he tried to say something, he found that his mouth didn't work either.

"The treatment was successful, then? The potion removed the residual dark magic?"

Remus. Harry remembered Snape telling Bill that Remus would be coming to sit with him. But that was when Snape had thought the potion would take all day to work. What time was it, anyway?

"...significant pain. However, the ward healer assigned to Mr. Potter completed a thorough scan just before you arrived. The residual dark magic is gone from his arm and hand and the nerve regenerative therapy will be done first thing tomorrow. Providing all goes well, he will be discharged by Monday."

"Severus, go get some sleep. I'll stay until you get back. You look—well, you've looked better, shall we say?"

Neither spoke for a few moments, then Snape said, "Fine—I need to speak to Albus anyway and make an appearance at Hogwarts. Potter will need a meal when he wakes. Molly left instructions to Floo call her and she'll bring something over."

"Severus, Molly said something odd happened at the end—when the potion tried to eradicate the curse damage from the Killing Curse. She said it was something between Harry and Albus..."

Another moment of silence followed before Snape answered.
"Not between Albus and Harry, Lupin. But this is what I am going to speak to Albus about. He was less than forthright with me before he left, but as I see it, Harry was ... was channeling the Dark Lord. And Albus knew—he knew it might happen. He was in there right away—locking eyes with Harry during the whole thing..."

"Like last year, then? With the snake at the Ministry when Arthur was attacked?" Remus' voice was edged with worry.

"Yes...perhaps. That's what I'd like to believe, anyway." But Harry thought Snape did not sound convinced. Last year, Harry had been the snake, had seen the corridor from the snake's perspective, and Voldemort had seen what the snake had seen...

It was fifteen minutes later when Harry finally was able to wrench his eyes open. Lupin busied himself getting him something to eat and drink and seemed grateful that Mrs. Weasley had sent enough for two—well, for three or four, actually, but the two were hungry enough to get through almost all of it. Harry felt immensely better. His right arm was back in the sling but the pain was nearly gone. He played several games of left-handed Wizard's Chess with Lupin before two new visitors arrived.

Professor McGonagall walked in carrying a bar of Honeyduke's chocolate and behind her, Luna, wide-eyed, held an over-sized magazine.

"Hello, Harry," said Luna, immediately moving to the empty straight-backed chair and sitting down beside him. She seemed inordinately comfortable in the sterile St. Mungo's environment.

"Hi, Luna," he said, his eyes quickly taking in the straw hat she wore with a wilted daisy chain around it and the curious pickle-shaped earrings. His mouth curved into a genuine smile as she smiled back. "Professor McGonagall said you could use some company your own age. I told her that I'm nearly a year younger than you but she didn't seem too concerned about that. She said you'd been surrounded by old fogies for weeks now."

Harry smirked and glanced at Professor McGonagall, who was standing at the end of the bed with a small but pleased smile on her face.

"I've brought you something to read, Harry," said Luna, proffering the magazine. Harry fully expected to be handed a cousin of the Quibbler—perhaps the summer edition of "Nargles, Plimpies and Crumple-Horned Snorkacks"—but instead found himself holding a special sports edition of The Daily Prophet on the coming season's Quidditch leagues.

"Wow, thanks!" he said. The beaters from the Holyhead Harpies took up a good portion of the front page. The Harpies were an all-female team and the beaters looked particularly aggressive. Each of them had several bar piercings through their eyebrows and one had what looked like a small bone through her nose.

"We'll leave you two for a few minutes," said Lupin, standing up. He and Professor McGonagall disappeared and Harry enjoyed an hour with Luna, a perfectly non-stressful hour of talking about their summers, the upcoming year and their friends away in Boston. If the conversation was peppered with odd non-sequiturs from Luna, all the better.

"I had a dream a couple of weeks ago," Harry said during a lull in the conversation. "You were in it. You were riding a thestral but it turned into a unicorn."

Luna didn't look the least bit surprised. "Really?" she said. "I'm not sure which I prefer, really—unicorns or thestrals. I suppose they're not really all that different..."
Harry woke the next morning to find Snape and Healer Gannon in his room already. Professor McGonagall had left the evening before with promises of a trip to Hogsmeade the upcoming week to buy "proper wizarding wear," and Luna had kissed him on the nose before leaving with his Head of House. He'd wiped distractedly at his nose while Lupin grinned. Snape hadn't returned and Harry had fallen asleep during a fourth round of chess with Lupin.

He wanted to ask Snape about Professor Dumbledore—about what had happened yesterday that made him look at Dumbledore with someone else's eyes. He knew whose eyes he'd been looking through, but didn't want to admit it just yet. If Snape knew—if Dumbledore had let on what had happened—he figured he'd be having a conversation with Snape once they were out of here. In his opinion, Healer Gannon already knew enough about him and didn't need to hear that particular conversation.

"Ready for another go?" asked Healer Gannon without preamble, seeing that Harry was awake. Snape eyed him from behind the healer.

"A trip to the loo first, perhaps, Healer Gannon?" he suggested with a raised eyebrow.

Once Harry had shed his slippers and was settled back in bed, Snape approached him, sitting on the bedside chair Mrs. Weasley and Luna had used the previous day. Harry thought Snape looked moderately better today—that he'd gotten a good night's sleep at least. He was wearing his lightweight black robes open over black trousers and his white button-down. Harry quite preferred him without the robes, he thought. It was easier to keep him in his "Shell Cottage" persona when he was in Muggle attire.

"Healer Gannon will put you to sleep for the first process," he said, "which will be immediately followed by the Nu-Nerve treatment. You'll be awake for that, but given the pain you went through yesterday, I've coerced the healer into giving you something to make you more comfortable. It's not a pain blocker per se, but a potion that alters your state of consciousness. You'll be awake and responsive, but you won't experience the pain in the same way you would without the potion."

Harry nodded. That didn't sound too bad.

"And I still get to leave tomorrow?"

Healer Gannon nodded. "Perhaps even this evening. Once the new nerves are grown, there is no reason to keep you any longer. Now, ready?" He raised his wand as Harry nodded.

When Harry awoke, Snape was still sitting beside him. He tried to sit up and experienced a moment of complete panic when he realized his arm was gone. No—quick check. Not gone – just not there.

"Excellent object lesson," said Snape. "Too bad it took a three-day stay in the hospital to achieve it. Nerves give you feeling. No nerves, no feeling. You arm is still there, Mr. Potter. Now, you will need to drink this so Healer Gannon can administer the Nu-Nerve."

He helped Harry sit then held out a potion which Harry took and swallowed without comment. Immediately, a feeling of intense calm came over him, flowing from his core to his fingers and toes—well, to the fingers he could feel, anyway.

"Wow," he breathed. He wanted to curl his toes. He closed his eyes and began to hum softly, following an internal beat that had to be the rhythm of his heart.
"One more, Harry," said a voice close to his ear. Another vial was pressed to his lips and
distractedly, he swallowed it. A jolt, like an electric shock, shot through him and he opened his eyes wide. Toes definitely uncurled now. Small tingling balls seemed to have shot to each of his extremities. They ran quickly up his legs into his groin—now that was odd—through his midsection then fizzled and died. The ball in his left arm did roughly the same—zipped up his arm quickly, down his shoulder and collar bone and faded out somewhere around his heart. Apparently, his head had gotten the same treatment for it seemed another jolt had run around his brain and down his throat, all rather quickly and painlessly.

But…

"Hey…my fingers…” Harry looked up at Snape and Healer Gannon, wide-eyed. "The tips..I can feel them! Pulsing…” He closed his eyes again and began nodding his head, the rhythm of nods following the pulsing in his fingertips.

"Is the conscious sedation potion totally effective now?" asked Snape. His voice seemed edgy, concerned, and Harry did not understand why.

"No," answered Healer Gannon. "It will increase in intensity for another twenty minutes or so, then hold steady for a few hours before beginning to taper off."

Five minutes later, Harry was holding his left hand in front of his face, staring at it raptly. When another healer entered the room moments after that, Harry dropped his hand. A huge smile lit his face.

"Hullo!" he called out. "I'm Harry Fawlty—welcome to my room!"

The healer, the older woman with cat's eye glasses, looked startled and glanced over at Healer Gannon.

"Evigilo Soporis," said the Healer.

"Ahh, so he's one of a thousand?" she replied, looking over at Harry with amusement.

"One of a thousand what?" Snape said.

Harry was looking at Healer Gannon now with his neck bent slightly to the side. "Do you like the Beatles too? And ballroom dancing?"

"One of a thousand what?" repeated Snape, moving to stand between Harry's bed and the two healers.

"Approximately 1/10 of 1 percent of wizards react to the Evigilo Soporis potion in a … shall we say … psychedelic way. The potion of course—like its Muggle counterpart—contains a mild hallucinogenic. In these patients—and apparently in Mr. Potter as well," here he looked significantly at Snape, "the potion blocks the mind's natural filters. In short, patients blurt out what's on their mind. No inner monologue. It can be quite amusing, really."

Harry snorted. "I like my slippers," he offered. "They fit and they've got no holes."

Snape quickly drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry. "Silencio!"

Harry looked around, confused. His lips kept moving but nothing was coming out. "Hey!" he protested soundlessly.
"You really shouldn't spell him like that, you know," said Healer Gannon. "He's under the effects of two very strong potions right now and additional magic…"

"You should have told me!" bellowed Snape. "I could have told you that he reacts strongly to hallucinogens!" Harry wondered if the throbbing vein on the side of Snape's face would explode. He imagined a spurt of blood like the one that had shot from the Basilisk bite yesterday.

"I apologize," replied the healer, trying to look around Snape at Harry, who was waving one finger around as if conducting their argument. "I simply didn't think…"

"No, you didn't think. You are going to have to leave this room for the rest of this treatment or submit to an Obliviate when it's over. Please go summon the Headmaster and ask him to send Madam Pomfrey over. She can monitor his vitals." His voice had dropped to a menacing whisper.

The two healers scurried away and Snape turned to Harry and muttered "Finite."

"You're acting like Professor Snape," said Harry.

"I am Professor Snape," said Snape.

"You like the Beatles!" exclaimed Harry. His attention then moved from Snape to his right hand. "Hurts…" he complained. "On fire…like when I burned Quirrell."

"Way too early to crash," muttered Snape, returning to the chair next to Harry's bed. "Your hand is fine. It is healing—the feeling is being restored to it. And yes, I like the Beatles. I told you about that…back at Shell Cottage."

"Who's your favorite?" asked Harry. "There were four of them. Dudley had a poster. He used to play their music really loud. Uncle Vernon called them long-haired hippies. But he took Dudley to Liverpool once. I wanted to go but there wasn't room in the car because Dudley had to take his guitar and it filled up the backseat. I stayed with Mrs. Figgy." He giggled. "I called one of her cats Ringo."

"My favorite," said Snape, ignoring the cat comment, "was John. He was killed…the year you were born, in fact. My next favorite is George."

"I like Ringo," said Harry.

"You would," muttered Snape. "Yellow Submarine?" He quirked an eyebrow at Harry.

"Ron didn't know what a submarine was," said Harry. "He thought I was barmy when I told him. Hermione drew a little picture and everything." He started to hum 'Yellow Submarine.' "What's wrong, don't you like it?" he asked Snape, seeing the pained look on his face.

Snape shook his head. "No, not much."

"I know a better one," said Harry, smugly. He considered a moment and began to sing in a surprisingly clear, pleasant voice.

"What would you think if I sang out of tune, would you stand up and walk out on me?" He drifted off into a few bars of humming then belted "I get by with a little help from my friends! I get high with a little help from my friends!"

Snape shook his head. "Truer words were never spoken," he muttered. Harry, however, had something new on his mind.
"Do you think Ginny is cute? I like her freckles. I wonder if she has freckles everywhere?" He looked at Snape and raised both his eyebrows in a fair imitation of the man. Snape smirked.

"Harry, what can you tell me about some boomslang skin that went missing during your second year…"

"Oh, Hermione stole that—and some other ingredients too," Harry answered.

Snape looked gleeful. The look didn't last long, though.

"Did I scare Professor Dumbledore?" he asked suddenly. "You know, when Voldemort was looking out of my eyes?"

"No Harry, you didn't," answered Snape. "I had a long talk with Professor Dumbledore last night." He paused, adding softly. "I think we know what we're dealing with now."

"Good," said Harry. He didn't understand, but he didn't have the focus to pursue any one strand of conversation too long. He looked down at his hand again. "My wrist is feeling all wonky," he said. "Like I hit my funny bone." He creased his eyebrows in thought a moment. "Since you like John so much, why don't you sing me one of his songs?"

Harry watched Snape glance at the curtained entrance to his cubicle.

"Come on, just one. Any one you want!"

Snape sighed. He glanced again at the doorway.

"Fine, Harry. One. Only one."

"Want me to hum the tune?" asked Harry brightly.

"I'm not sure that you know it…this one wasn't done with the Beatles. But do join in if you recognize it."

"Sure," said Harry, shifting his position and pulling his legs in. He stared at Snape raptly, inhibitions gone.

"Imagine there's no heaven," Snape sang softly. "It's easy if you try. No hell below us, Above us only sky…"

And that's how Madam Pomfrey found them a few minutes later. Harry was huddled up against the headboard, left arm wrapped around his legs which were pushed up against his chest. Snape was sitting in the chair beside the bed, singing in a low, wistful voice.

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join us, and the world will live as one."

Chapter 39

August 18th – 20th

RETURN TO SHELL COTTAGE
By the time the Evigilo Soporis potion wore off six hours later, Harry had confided that most of Gryffindor House believed Snape was a vampire, that they thought his Animagus form was a vampire bat or a crow and that he washed his hair with cooking oil. He’d described his first kiss—with Cho Chang in the Room of Requirement beneath a sprig of mistletoe—in great detail. He’d discussed Norbert the dragon from the moment it hatched on Hagrid's table, sneezing sparks, to its covert night time departure with Charlie Weasley's friends. Snape managed to get in a few more questions about the stolen boomslang skin and Harry had expounded on the feeling of Polyjuicing into Goyles and stealing into the Slytherin Common Room. He'd coerced Snape into singing with him—this time they'd sung When I'm Sixty-Four, as Harry wanted to try one of Paul's songs, and Snape claimed the music for that one was the first McCartney had ever written. Harry thought it was a rather sad song, despite its upbeat melody, but rather liked the part about renting a cottage on the Isle of Wight. Then Harry talked of wanting to be an Auror, or a Healer, or a professional Quidditch Player, or a Dragon Keeper, or maybe, someday, a teacher at Hogwarts. Snape groaned audibly and pretended to count on his fingers the years 'til his retirement. Finally, when the feeling in Harry’s arm was up past his elbow and the effect of the Evigilo Soporis potion was just beginning to taper off, making Harry's emotions less euphoric and more melancholic, Harry turned to Snape and wistfully asked "Tell me something about my mum."

He watched Snape carefully as his professor noticeably paused, a smile flitting across his tired-again face.

"She was gifted in Potions as well as Charms, but she liked Charms more. Her laugh was infectious. She loved Jane Austen—she had the oldest, most worn copy of Pride and Prejudice. Her favorite color was blue. She loved winter."

Harry continued to stare wide-eyed at Snape, mentally packing away all those small offering to retrieve and study later and resolving to learn more about Jane Austen. "Who was her favorite Beatle?" he asked.

"Paul," answered Snape without hesitation. "It was always Paul."

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At eight o’clock that night, twelve hours after his treatment began that same morning, Harry and Snape once again stood in the living room of the flat in London. Harry had come down rather hard from the Evigilo Soporis potion, ending up in deep sobs that wracked his shoulders. He couldn't explain why he was crying—it had started during an animated discussion of potential Animagus forms (during which Snape had informed Harry that he wasn't an Animagus and if he were his form most definitely would not be a vampire bat, though he rather liked the idea of being a crow), and had gone on to Harry revealing the Patronus work the D.A. had done the previous school year including Cho's Patronus (a swan), Hermione's (an otter) and Ron's (a Jack Russell terrier). The terrier reminded him of dogs, which reminded him of Snuffles which, of course, reminded him of Sirius. And the tears had started. If he closed his eyes tightly enough, he could see Snuffles running on the platform at King’s Cross Station, could remember last Christmas at Grimmauld Place, could see Sirius falling slowly through the veil as Remus grabbed him, held him back, kept him from following Sirius. Then somehow he was crying because the Dursleys didn't want him and had made him sleep in a cupboard and he hadn't gotten to go with them to Liverpool to take the Beatles tour, and then because his parents had died and no one had ever told him before what his mother's favorite author was, or her favorite season, or her favorite Beatle.

Madam Pomfrey had moved in to hug and hold him as Snape had looked on, rather helplessly, occasionally patting his back as Harry sobbed "And they took the guitar instead of me…”
But now Harry's face was clear, his right arm occasionally twitching as new nerves connected and fired, and his backpack was packed and slung over his left shoulder. He'd decided to take the book he'd found here, and Snape hadn't objected, but had left the negligee. Snape had threatened to pack it in his trunk with all his new clothes, but Harry had given him the evil eye at that suggestion and had threatened to tell the rest of the Gryffindors that Snape sung Beatles songs in the shower and had a tattoo of the Queen Mum on his bicep.

"I will follow you with the trunk," Snape said as he pointed his wand at the fire to ignite it and handed Harry a handful of Floo powder.

Harry stumbled out into the sitting room of Shell Cottage a few moments later. It was absolutely dark out so he used the Muggle matches on the mantle to light two of the oil lamps. When Snape appeared a minute later, Harry said "It's raining. I don't think it was raining in London."

"We're not in London," answered Snape, looking out the front windows as lightning flashed across the western sky. "And I'd rather be here with rain than in London with sunny skies."

Rain was beating down on the roof as Harry picked up a lamp and made for the porch, dropping his backpack at the bottom of the stairs as he passed them. Snape followed him as Harry put the lamp on the table and sunk immediately into the hammock with a contented sigh.

"I've missed this place," he sighed. "Can I sleep here tonight?"

In answer, Snape picked up the beach blanket from the back of the chair near the door where they'd left it, shook the sand out of it, wadded it up and tossed it across the room to Harry. Harry caught it with both hands—a major accomplishment he thought—and arranged it over himself. It smelled pleasantly of salt and sand and the sea. The hammock creaked as it rocked gently back and forth and Harry watched as Snape turned down the flame on the lamp, leaving just enough wick exposed to throw a slight flicker against the walls.

"Pleasant dreams," said Snape quietly but meaningfully as he left the room. Harry, exhausted from the day and with the Nu-Nerve still completing its work, fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

The sea pounded outside and the Evigilo Soporis potion, waning but present, coursed through his veins. It was inevitable that tonight would be a night of sea dreams.

This dream, however, had a linear quality to it that Harry clearly remembered when he awoke. He was sitting on the sandy stretch of beach between Shell Cottage and the ocean. Snuffles was running up and down, barking and nipping at the waves kissing the shorelines. A smaller dog, a white and red Jack Russell terrier, ran behind him, jumping at Snuffles' tail. It looked like Snuffles was waving it deliberately, just out of the terrier's reach, teasing the smaller, younger dog with its movement. A sleek otter, a hare, and a horse joined the group at play. The hare ran in and out beneath the horse's legs while the otter splashed in the shallow water with the two dogs. Harry stood up, drawn to the animals, morphing as he did so into Prongs, but Prongs as his father had been, not a wispy smoky Patronus memory of the stag. Snuffles saw the stag and ran back toward him, changing into Sirius mid-run, a younger Sirius with bright eyes, laughing and hugging Prongs' neck. "The ocean is my home now, James," he said as he let go of the stag, "I've come to say goodbye." Prongs dissolved into Harry again as Sirius ran toward the shore, not stopping at the edge but wading out until he was waist deep, robes floating out on the surface of the water beside him, then turning back to wave before striking out seaward with a steady stroke until Harry, looking out through glasses clouded with tears, could barely see him. A dolphin tail flicked where Sirius had last been then disappeared leaving only concentric circles of ripples. Harry was still looking sadly seaward when Neville, walking barefoot in the sand, approached him and stood beside him, standing quietly with Harry as his attention moved back to watch their friends play. "Don't you want to play too?" asked Harry. "I
do,” said Neville, “but I don’t know who I am.” Harry turned to him. “You’re a mongoose, Neville,” he said, with complete confidence. He held out his hands toward Neville and Neville morphed from human to lion to mongoose in two blinks of an eye. The five animals ran off together down the shoreline and a cat appeared, walking gingerly over the sand, changing to Professor McGonagall as it neared him. "Keep your friends close, Harry," she advised, standing beside him and watching the small herd disappear where the shoreline turned, "but know who they are." She pointed down at their feet, where horse, stag, dog, otter, mongoose and hare tracks mixed and melded and a single set of tracks, cloven hooves like Prongs’, led off along the shore in the other direction. Harry moved to follow, but a crashing wave pushed water up to and past their feet and the tracks faded, disappearing completely as the water flowed back to the sea. Professor McGonagall's hand on his shoulder stalled him. "It's not time, Harry. Not now. Not yet."

Harry woke, staring at the ceiling of narrow tongue-in-groove boards, disturbed by the dream, but somehow comforted as well. The rain was still falling outside, the sea was still pounding, the night was still dark. He closed his eyes again and though he continued to dream, of magic flying motorcycles and Dudley floating away like Aunt Marge almost had and driving a Muggle taxi through the Forbidden Forest, he didn't remember those when he awoke.

The next day was among the best he'd had that summer. Snape himself slept in until nearly nine. Harry attempted a full English breakfast, minus the black pudding, and Snape obligingly put away juice, eggs, sausage, bacon, toast, beans, mushrooms and a rather weak parboiled tomato. They spent the morning on the beach, reading and collecting the shells the waves had deposited during last night's storm, and ate sandwiches and crisps when they were hungry, well after two o'clock. Harry's right arm surprised him with occasional jolts and jumps, but it calmed as the day progressed, and Snape spent an hour lobbing rocks and shells at him from across the beach so he could practice catching them.

"You know you're helping the enemy, don't you?" asked Harry as he jumped to catch a shell the size of his palm, one which Snape generically called a bivalve.

"Perhaps I'm helping Slytherin by making sure Ms. Weasley doesn't retake the Seeker's position," he said, tossing a round stone toward Harry. "She was rather formidable."

"Hey!" protested Harry. Then a thought struck him. "You know, I brought my broom. It's up in my bedroom. You don't think...?"

Snape gave a very exaggerated sigh and motioned to the cottage. "Go get it. I will go over the extent of the wards when you return."

Harry practically gave a whoop of joy but resisted yelling out loud, feeling like he was eleven instead of sixteen as he ran back toward the cottage to get the broom before Snape came to his senses and changed his mind. He pulled the Firebolt from the back of the wardrobe, then ran back to the beach, not noticing, as he ran, that his left leg didn't ache or cramp or weaken.

"Eager, aren't we?" asked Snape as Harry practically skidded to a halt in front of him.

Harry smiled and pushed the hair back from his eyes as Snape took out his wand and did a sweeping, circular motion with it.

"That is the extent of the wards," said Snape. "Stay within them at all times and do not go higher than the roof of the cottage. Harry did a circle with his eyes, taking in the glimmering walls of wards, forty meters wide and out to sea at least the length of a Quidditch pitch. He mounted his broom, realizing he hadn't been on it for months and months, but feeling at home nonetheless. He kicked off and was gone.
Out and back, around and down, up and through. He did laps around the house, rolls out over the ocean, dives where his toes skimed the water and then the sand. And always he would see Snape, sitting on the beach blanket that had served as Harry's cover last night, not even making a pretense of reading the book he'd brought with him as he watched Harry. One time, briefly, Harry thought it would be just perfect if Ron were there to fly with him but then he flew over Snape, less than a meter over his head and Snape reached up his hand as if to grab the broom and Harry reached down and brushed Snape's fingertips with his own.

Wanted.

Perhaps loved. But even as the thought briefly flitted through his brain, he stuffed it back down, inside a cocoon of water, deep within a protective membrane where light and sound could not penetrate.

This was enough. He could not, should not, ask for more.

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They had another fire that night, though Snape had to cast a drying charm on the still rain-soaked driftwood. Snape let him drink all the Butterbeers he wanted as he himself sipped on a glass of scotch he had poured from an old and dusty bottle he'd brought out of his bedroom upstairs.

"We will return to Hogwarts tomorrow," said Snape during a lull in the conversation. They had been talking about Harry's dream and Snape had taken a curious interest in Neville and the mongoose, telling Harry that the mongoose was famous as a snake killer and was known to even fight cobras. Harry wondered at that and thought that perhaps the mongoose was an appropriate symbol for a loyal Gryffindor.

"After Minerva takes you to Hogsmeade on Wednesday, your friends are scheduled to visit you for a day or two."

"At Hogwarts?" asked Harry. "I'm not going to the Burrow?"

"No, they will come to Hogwarts," answered Snape without further explanation, but Harry knew that Hogwarts was safer and worried that the Burrow might be at risk whether or not he was there.

"And what after that?" Harry asked. Today's what…the 20th?"

"Today is August 19th," answered Severus. "Monday. I have one more week of holiday—professors are required to be at Hogwarts by the 26th to prepare for the coming school year. I will have more to get ready this year than usual, as I'm teaching a new subject, and the previous few Defense instructors didn't leave me with a wealth of useable lesson plans."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Lockhart once gave us a quiz with 54 questions—all about himself. I couldn't remember if his favorite color was lilac or periwinkle. I'd get that one right about you though, wouldn't I?"

"Would you?" Snape answered. "What's my favorite color then?"

"You expect me to say black, don't you?" said Harry, taking the last swig of his fourth Butterbeer.

"You tell me," answered Snape, grinning behind his glass of scotch.

"It's green," said Harry. "It's nearly the only color you wear besides white and black."
"I'll have to remember to leave that question off my first quiz so as not to give you an unfair advantage," said Snape, lifting an eyebrow and taking another sip of scotch.

"So you have next weekend free?" asked Harry after they'd sat quietly for a few moments more.

Snape looked over at him, curious. "Yes. I do. What did you have in mind?"

Harry fiddled with his now empty bottle of Butterbeer. "Nothing, really. We could come here again, perhaps."

"Perhaps," answered Snape. "I will discuss it with your guardian."

Harry half-smiled. "She won't want me to go meet the family or anything, will she?"

Snape snorted. "I sincerely hope you are spared that experience. Minerva's daughters and daughter-in-law would consider it quite a coup to land you for one of their girls. Fortunately, Minerva's late husband was French and both daughters and their families are still on the continent—the grandchildren are at Beaubatons."

Snape stood then, resting his half-full glass of scotch in the sand. He looked out toward the ocean then reached into his trouser pocket for his wand and swept it wide, casting a wordless spell that hung fairy lights in the warm air over the cool water. The rolling waves seemed to reach for the lights, not quite touching them, but making them waiver and dance.

"Fancy a swim?" he asked Harry. He was pulling off his trousers and Harry saw, to his surprise, that Snape wore his swimming shorts underneath. Not waiting for Harry, he shucked his shirt then waded out into the water. When he was waist-deep, he dived under and came up several meters farther out, shaking his long hair out of his eyes.

"Yeah," said Harry, standing up and pulling off his t-shirt. "I do."

And he thought that evening that he'd never get tired of the feeling of the cool ocean water against his skin, of the way the sounds were muffled underwater, of the buoyancy of both his body and his spirit.

He'd changed over the summer. He recognized the growth, the healing, the reversal in his perspective, the fledgling feelings of trust and hope. And watching Snape do a lazy crawl stroke across the water, flipping to float on his back and watch the stars, he wondered if he had changed as well, or if this Snape had always been there, but trapped within a dungeon, bright eyes hiding behind a curtain of lanky black hair.

Chapter 40

August 20th

GUARDIANS AND GIFTS

Harry spent the next morning, after another late breakfast, packing everything he owned into his trunk. He left his broom out, and didn't have to worry about Hedwig or her cage as both were back at Hogwarts already—Hedwig had been sent winging back from the flat the morning they'd left for St. Mungo's. At eleven, he came downstairs, dragging the trunk behind him, and deposited it in the
sitting room next to the fireplace. Snape appeared in the entryway—he must have been on the porch
or in the kitchen. He'd already been upstairs while Harry was packing and had transfigured the
waterbed back into a normal mattress.

"You don't suppose Professor McGonagall will let me transfigure my bed at Hogwarts like that, do
you?" Harry had asked.

Snape had paused. "I suspect that if you can successfully master a transfiguration of this scale, she'd
let you sleep in a coffin."

"Couldn't I just borrow yours?" quipped Harry. Snape cuffed him lightly on the ear as he left the
room.

"One more visit to the seaside," Snape said now as he stood looking at Harry in the sitting room. His
black robes were draped over his shoulder but he was wearing his trainers, Harry noted, and not his
boots.

They walked together through the kitchen and back porch. Snape plucked the blanket off the chair as
they passed, leaving his robes in its place. He spread out the blanket on the sand after they picked
their way to a spot by the remnants of the beach fire a few minutes later and they both sat down on it,
side by side, facing the ocean. Harry picked up a stone and tossed it far out with his right arm,
enjoying the feel of the muscles at play in that arm.

When Snape began to speak, he didn't look at Harry but instead kept his focus forward, watching the
gentle action of the quiet morning waves.

"I do not know when we will next have the opportunity for a long, private talk. I hope we can
arrange something more enjoyable than a serious discussion for next weekend—no, I have not
forgotten, Harry." He glanced sideways as Harry quickly shut his mouth again, looking chagrinned.
"Let me first say you have truly and utterly surprised me these past weeks. It will be impossible for
me to view you as I used to—though you must remember that I will have to appear to do so. But
knowing you as I do now, I am about to throw a wrench in the Headmaster's plans and give you a
clue to some information that he does wish you to know just yet."

Again, he looked over at Harry, but Harry had assumed his listening position, legs drawn up with
knees under his chin, arms wrapped around his legs. It was a protective position, but one that told
him Harry was listening even though Harry's eyes were focused forward on the gentle waves.

"The Headmaster will be working closely with you this next school year. He has much to teach
you…to pass on to you…information you can only learn from him. He has not confided all to me,
but I have been in this business for some time, so to speak, and have surmised much." Snape paused
here. It seemed to Harry that he was trying to collect his thoughts, or worse, gather the courage to
continue. Snape picked up a shell from the sand beside the blanket, turning it over in his hand to
examine it, then sending it sailing out into the waves with a side-handed toss.

"Harry, the Dark Lord seeks immortality. His greatest fear is death. This should not come as a
surprise to you—you have known this since first year when the Philosopher's Stone was protected at
Hogwarts. But he has done something utterly evil to further protect himself. It is the Headmaster's
right, not mine, to explain this more fully, but when he does, I want you to remember what happened
in the hospital when the potion attempted to remove the residual curse damage here." He surprised
Harry by laying his thumb lightly on Harry's forehead.

"You mean when I was seeing out of Voldemort's eyes," said Harry, softly, tossing another stone
rather forcefully into the ocean. Once said, he could hardly believe he had said it, had admitted it out
loud to anyone, much less an adult instead of one of his friends.

Snape paused.

"I wonder," he said at last. "If it was you seeing out of his eyes, or him seeing out of yours?"

Harry shrugged. He had never thought of it like that before. "All I know is that the Dumbledore I saw was old and weak. I thought he was useless. I didn’t think he was the greatest wizard that ever lived. Still, I was more afraid of him than anything else…"

Snape didn’t comment for a moment.

"Remember that, then, Harry, when Professor Dumbledore explains what the Dark Lord has done to keep himself tethered to this earth. If you have questions, ask the Headmaster directly and immediately. If he will not answer or is not forthright with you, come to me. I am looking for a way for us to communicate privately, so that no one—on either side—becomes suspicious."

Harry looked over at Snape gratefully.

"This is going to make more sense later, isn’t it?” asked Harry. He was doodling in the sand with his finger now, thinking about what had happened in the hospital.

"It is. I assure you," answered Snape. "Harry, there is something else…” His voice caught a bit and Harry looked over at him, worried.

"The Headmaster is … ill," he said. "Harry, he is slowly dying. He may not have enough time to tell you all that you need to know. This, too, if information he does not want you to have but I feel you must know."

"Dying?" Harry stared at Snape. "What do you mean, dying? He…the cursed. You told me that…that night he came here to the cottage. You didn’t say he was dying!"

"Harry…Harry, listen to me a moment. The Headmaster is already well past one hundred years old. Yes, wizards can and do often live longer than that. But he is already old, and the curse cannot be stopped. I cannot tell you how much time he has and am doing all in my power to slow the progression of the wasting…"

Harry wasn’t looking at Snape. He’d drawn up his knees again, and was resting his forehead on them, his arms drawing his legs in close.

"You’re sure?" His voice was small. "There’s nothing? A potion?" A couple of errant tears splashed down onto his knees but he fought them back. People didn’t live forever. Everyone he loved always died.

Snape shook his head. "You must know I have done everything in my power. And Albus is a great wizard—I do not always agree with his machinations and methods, but he is great nonetheless. Harry, I do not tell you this to add more sorrow to your life. Unlike Albus, I believe it is critical that you understand the limits on his time—the time he has left to teach you what you must know—so that you make the most of every moment you have together." He paused for a moment, looking out to sea. Harry turned his head to look at him, resting his left cheek on his knee. He thought Snape looked younger than normal, younger and slightly lost.

"Harry, I have betrayed the Headmaster’s trust in giving you this information, and I must ask you not to share it with anyone—not even your friends. Furthermore, you must go forward with the headmaster’s lessons with you as if you do not know any more than you knew before your accident.
The Headmaster is trying to protect you while he prepares you for what you must do to defeat the Dark Lord. I, however, feel that this type of protection will ultimately do you more harm than good. I have never … never… gone against his wishes before. But neither have I ever had reason to.’’

“You know,” admitted Harry, after a very long silence. “This isn’t the kind of thing that will be easy to keep to myself…especially…especially as he gets worse…”

“You will come to me, then,” said Snape with finality. “I will find a way.”

Harry nodded awkwardly, still looking sideways at Snape, feeling suddenly grateful.

“I love Albus Dumbledore very much,” said Snape. “He stood by me in the most difficult of times. And I believe he loves me as well, and he certainly loves you. But I am not Albus. I believe you have a choice in all of this, Harry, and I will not judge you if at any point you turn and walk away.”

“Do you want me to walk away? Do you think I should?” asked Harry, looking for something...anything...in Snape’s dark eyes.

“No,” answered Snape, “but I know it is not my choice, but yours. That is what I am saying. I will not think any less of you no matter the course you ultimately choose. And for my part, I will try to make the road a bit easier for you. I have helped to give you tools, and to help you see what you already have inside of you. Now I will arm you with information—with knowledge. It is the best I can do.”

Harry stood and gazed out at the sea for a while more. “I’m going to miss this place,” he said. He looked down at Snape, who was still sitting on the blanket cross-legged, leaning back on his hands. “Will you come back with me one day? When it’s over? If we both make it?”

Snape stood then and brushed sand from his pants.

“I’d be happy to, Harry. I think by that time we’ll both need a holiday.”

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An hour later, Harry Potter found himself tossed out of the Floo in Severus Snape’s quarters at Hogwarts. He stumbled, as he always did when traveling by Floo, and steadied himself by grabbing on to the mantel. Snape was there a moment later, stepping gracefully out onto the hearth, dusting ashes from his robes. Harry was holding his Firebolt, which looked a bit worse for the wear, and Snape had his trunk, which looked perfectly fine, well fine for a five-year-old trunk anyway. Snape took a few steps over to a door and placed the trunk on the floor.

Harry looked around while he had the chance. If someone had asked him a month ago to describe Severus Snape’s personal quarters, he would have imagined them to be cold, stark and full of gross and dangerous potions ingredients. Looking around now, it was obvious that Snape was not a wealthy man or a man of opulent taste. The quarters were small, consisting, from what Harry could see, of a spacious sitting room, a galley kitchen and a short hallway with two doors—one bedroom, one bathroom he guessed. The floor was stone, matching the dungeon classrooms, but a window next to the fireplace—obviously enchanted like the ceiling in the Great Hall, for they were in the dungeons after all—showed the sloped grade down to the Quidditch Pitch. A small wooden table for two near the kitchen, a very worn leather sofa of brown leather, a desk with an old-fashioned wooden desk chair with wheels and a leather armchair which more or less matched the sofa, were the only furnishings. It looked like the castle had provided the portraits on the wall—one was of a stern-looking man with a goatee dressed in Henry VIII style garb and the other a young dark-haired woman in a potions lab. Her hair was on top of her head in a strict bun. Harry looked again at the
first portrait. He remembered that one quite clearly—it had been in the Slytherin Common room when he and Ron had broken in while Polyjuiced into Crabbe and Goyle.

Snape allowed him to look his fill, eying Harry carefully as he noticed a clock on the mantel and approached it in wonder.

"It is a gift from the Headmaster," said Snape after a moment, stepping up next to Harry. "He had it made for me this summer."

The clock had only one hand, topped with a very small photo of Harry. It looked very much like the Weasley's clock, but on a much smaller scale and with one hand instead of nine. Around the edges of the clock, where the numbers one to twelve should have appeared, were the phrases "Class," "Quidditch," "Hagrid's," "Gryffindor Tower," "Great Hall," "In Trouble," "Hogsmeade," "Traveling," "Ill or Injured," "On Holiday," "Somewhere Safe" and "Mortal Peril." Harry lifted a hand up to touch the clock, which currently pointed squarely at "Somewhere Safe."

"Do you mind?" asked Snape at last, as Harry continued to stare at the clock. "I thought you might find it too intrusive but the Headmaster assured me…"

"No, it's great," answered Harry. That knot was back in his stomach, accompanied this time by a lump in his throat. For a moment, he wished he had a clock like that with Snape's face on it, but he remembered, then, that he didn't need a clock to know when Severus was in pain…and one of these days they'd have to test that "passion" theory too. "The Weasley's have one of these, you know. I've…I've always loved that clock." He swallowed. "You won't come looking for me every time it points to "In Trouble," will you? I mean, it could mean almost anything! I might be in Detention, or late for class because I overslept…"

"I'll use my discretion," said Snape, dryly. "If you manage to stay out of minor trouble, and avoid detentions with Mr. Filch, I'll only burst in on you when you're in a serious mess. Come now, we need to Floo up to the Headmaster's office. The Ministry officials are gone now and the wards reorganized and strengthened, but it would not do for us to be seen walking amicably through the halls of Hogwarts."

Harry wilted a bit at this statement, but steeled himself, telling himself that his reaction was silly. He'd been told already, been warned by Snape, and Snape was trying to figure out a way for them to communicate, and he did have the clock. Snape pointed to the jar of Floo powder on the mantel beside the clock, and moments later they were stepping into the Headmaster's office, or better said, Snape was stepping into his office and offering Harry a hand up from where he had tripped when he stumbled out of the Floo and had fallen on the floor.

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his eyes alert as he watched Harry pull himself to his feet. Professor McGonagall was seated in front of his desk, glasses pushed down on her nose, reviewing a document. There were two more chair in front of the Headmaster's desk, and Snape immediately walked over and took the one on the outside, leaving Harry to sit between himself and Professor McGonagall. Professor McGonagall had put the document down, face up, on Professor Dumbledore's desk and Harry glanced at it, confirming that it was the guardianship paperwork.

"You're looking particularly well, Harry," said Professor McGonagall. "I see Severus let you go hog wild at the clothing store and didn't restrict you to black and white. You're far too young to dress like a vicar." She shot Snape a meaningful look.

"Would you rather have him looking more like Albus?" he retorted. Harry noted that Professor Dumbledore was wearing a lilac robe—or was it periwinkle?—with silver stars at the cuffs, hem and neckline. The matching hat was silver with lilac trim and was perched on his head in such a way as
to give him a good fifteen centimeters of additional height. Harry's eyes moved automatically to Dumbledore's hand. He was surprised to see the tips of blackened fingers peeking out from the robe's cuff. He glanced quickly over at Snape, but Snape had moved his own gaze to the document.

Harry looked down at his own clothing—dark blue jeans, plain black belt, dark green t-shirt. He couldn't help but grin. Was this really "hog wild" for Snape? He wondered what he'd make of Ron's orange Chudley Cannon wear.

"Why Severus, do you have a problem with my robes?" asked Dumbledore.

"Of course not, Headmaster," answered Snape, and Harry could hear the sarcasm in this voice. "I am sure that there are some interesting clubs in Muggle London where you would blend right in."

"I believe we are here to discuss Mr. Potter's guardianship?" interrupted Professor McGonagall, apparently not thinking the direction of the conversation was appropriate for her new ward.

"Yes, yes, Minerva, thank-you for the reminder," said the Headmaster. "You have reviewed the document and find it sound?"

"I have," she answered, "but I'd like Mr. Potter to read it, and Severus as well." She handed the document to Harry, who held it between himself and Snape so they could both read it.

"So what happens when I turn seventeen?" asked Harry, having just read that the guardianship would end at midnight on July 30, 1997.

"You are free to make your own decisions once you reach your majority," answered Professor Snape, somewhat distractedly as he was still reading the lengthy document.

"But people don't just stop listening to their parents when they turn seventeen, do they?" asked Harry.

"No, they typically stop far sooner than that," answered Snape. "Case in point, the Weasley twins."

"I will be there for you as long as you have need of me, even if that is until you have children of your own," said Minerva, frowning disapprovingly at Snape. "As will Severus. For any reason, be it academic, financial, emotional or otherwise."

"Good," Harry said. A vague image came to mind of McGonagall and Snape chastising him for spending half of his fortune on a new Quidditch broom when he was twenty-four. He smiled as he continued to scan the document.

"What about this part—a 'second' who will fill in for you if you're unable to perform your duties? You haven't put anyone's name in yet." Harry glanced over at Snape. Snape had an odd look on his face, somewhere between satisfied and disappointed, if that were even possible.

"We wanted to discuss that with you, Harry. Of course, we all understand that your first choice of guardian would not be me, but given the circumstances of Severus' other duties..." Professor McGonagall looked a bit green in the face as she said it, Harry thought, as if thinking of what those duties entailed gave her indigestion. She didn't give him any opportunity to protest, to deny that Snape would be his first choice if he had been allowed to pick his guardian. If he had protested, he knew it would have been purely from habit. "Well, he simply cannot be listed on this type of official document that is filed at the Ministry. We still do not know for certain who at the Ministry..." Her voice faded out. "However, Severus has already been given first right of refusal, so to speak—veto power on any guardian Professor Dumbledore chose. I am honored to have made the cut, to be his first choice from the proffered candidates. In any event, I would like Severus to choose your second,
"William Weasley," said Snape, almost immediately.

Dumbledore dropped the lemon drop he was picking up from a tin on the desk.

"Don't you mean Arthur, Severus?" he asked.

"If I meant Arthur Weasley, I would have said Arthur Weasley," groused Snape.

"But Arthur and Molly have expressed…"

"Albus," cut in Snape, managing to keep his voice level and firm. "Arthur and Molly Weasley are parents of seven children. They have their hands full already. I think Harry would agree with me that William is an appropriate choice."

"Bill's great," said Harry, looking from Snape to Dumbledore. As always he had a million questions. Who else had Dumbledore suggested as a guardian? Why did Snape think Bill would be the second best choice? What exactly had Mr. and Mrs. Weasley expressed?

Dumbledore didn't press the point further, and Harry and Snape continued reading the document. When all his questions had been fully answered and the document was completely filled out, both Harry and Professor McGonagall signed it. Professor Dumbledore then added his name in green ink as the witness. It took him quite a long time to sign all of his names and titles. The document was placed on top of the release from the Dursleys and as soon as Dumbledore tapped the stack with his wand, it rolled up with a snap and disappeared with a pop.

"Excellent!" said Dumbledore. He reached into a cabinet behind his desk and extracted a bottle of scotch that looked as old and almost as dusty as the bottle Snape had had at Shell Cottage. He poured a measure into each of four glasses and pushed them across the desk.

"To Harry and his new guardian," he said, lifting his glass. He looked at Snape then and added, "and to all in this room who love him and wish him well."

Harry lifted his own glass and took a swallow. The liquid burned going down but gave him a warm feeling in his stomach once it settled. He smiled at the Headmaster, ignoring the withered hand, refusing to see death in those sparkling blue eyes.

Thirty minutes later, Harry was unpacking his trunk in Gryffindor Tower. Ron, Hermione and Ginny would be arriving the following afternoon and would stay until Friday, all of them sleeping in the Gryffindor dorms. He put his clothes away carefully, stood him broom up in his wardrobe after clipping off the twigs that had frayed in the trip through the Floo, and began to stack his textbooks on his desk. He pushed away thoughts of Professor Dumbledore and what Snape had told him, even though the juxtaposition in his mind of the withered hand and the sparkling eyes worried him. Professor McGonagall would be taking him to Hogsmeade for new robes the next morning and would fetch his sixth year books and supplies from Diagon Alley.

Near the bottom of his trunk, mixed in with his fifth-year books, was a textbook he'd not seen before. Advanced Potion Making, the sixth year potions text, was worn and battered and looked like it had barely survived a major cauldron explosion. Where had that come from? He didn't have his sixth year supplies yet. He picked it up and weighed it in his hands—it felt like a normal textbook though on closer inspection, it looked like it had been run over by the Knight Bus before surviving the cauldron explosion. He opened it carefully and examined front and back covers. "This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince" was written across the bottom of the back cover. That was odd.
Harry closed it and opened it again, finding a folded piece of parchment tucked inside near the middle.

"To Harry: You have in your hand my personal copy of the sixth year Potions textbook, the same one I used when I was at Hogwarts. Your attention to the notes I have made within should help you on your quest to become an Auror (or a healer, or a Hogwarts Professor, though unfortunately not a professional Quidditch Player or a vampire bat Animagus). Also contained within these pages are spells you may not know, many of my own creation. Never use one unless you know what it does first. If you don't know, ask me. I am still devising the best way for us to communicate, but will have it resolved before term starts.

"Remember I told you my father was a Muggle. My mother's name, before she married my father, was Eileen Prince.

The note was signed "SS, the HBP."

________________________________________
Chapter 41
________________________________________

August 21st

HOGWARTS AND HOGSMEADE

Harry spent a good hour that afternoon curled up on a squashy sofa in the common room with the potions book, paging through it, turning it sideways and upside down to read the notes scribbled in the margins. Snape had crammed writing in everywhere—next to potion directions, in the margins above and beside lists of ingredients, literally wherever there was white space to write. Sometimes he altered the ingredients—suggesting a few less beetle eyes or a bit more armadillo bile. Other times he suggested the potion be stirred for a longer—or shorter—time, or with a figure eight motion, or that a lower or higher flame be used. Harry could truly see the future Potions Master in the making, and wondered if he would ever be as passionate in his life about something as Snape obviously was—or had been—about potions.

He ate dinner in the Great Hall at the staff table with the staff members that were in the castle. Besides Professors McGonagall, Snape and Dumbledore, only two others were present for the meal—Hagrid and Filch. Filch looked at him with obvious disapproval as he slid into his chair between Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape but Hagrid greeted him warmly—and loudly. Hagrid invited him to his hut after dinner, and he spent two happy hours playing with Fang and admiring the giant hybrid fire lizard hatchlings Hagrid said he'd be using with the first and second years this term. The creatures were currently the size of nifflers and had bright orange, yellow or red stripes running from head to tail. Small flames shot out whenever they opened their mouths and Harry got burned more than once while helping Hagrid sort them into crates by color—the red were males, the yellow females and the orange, said Hagrid, were both. Harry made a note to look those up in the library when he had a chance.

He made it back to Gryffindor Tower before dark to find both Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape waiting for him in the common room. There was something incongruous about seeing the Potions Master in Gryffindor, and Harry wished he had a camera and could take a picture to show Ron tomorrow. Professor Snape stood up when he came in through the portrait hole, looking at him disapprovingly but with a trace of humor that had been totally absent in Filch's stare during dinner. Snape pointed his wand at the snitch-sized burn-hole in his new t-shirt and cast a quick and effective
"You do realize that Reparo won't fix that burn on your skin under the hole, or those blisters on your fingers, do you not?" he asked.

"Um..yeah. Hagrid told me to ask you for some burn cream since Madam Pomfrey's not here. I didn't quite trust the stuff he wanted me to use—it was in an old tea cup and looked a bit rancid." He smiled. "And thanks – for the Reparo. I'll be more careful tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" said Snape. "You liked fire lizards enough to spend more time with them?"

"Well, the orange ones anyway," said Harry. Professor McGonagall snorted.

"Ron will want to see them," said Harry, "and Hagrid told me they'll be shedding their first skin soon and that he saves the skins for you for potions ingredients. He said you'd be 'drooling like a boarhound' to get hold of them."

"He did, did he?" said Snape as Professor McGonagall let out yet another quite unladylike snort. "Well, you and your friends can collect them and save me a trip, then," said Snape. "I'll get you a jar for them when I fetch your burn cream."

"You will need to learn the fire-proofing charm for clothing if you are planning to spend more time with Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall. "Student robes are imbued with the protection when they are purchased but Muggle-wear is not."

"Sure, I will." Harry stood looking at his two professors for a moment. "Did you want something?" he asked at last, feeling awkward standing there with no one saying anything.

"Only to tell you to meet me at the castle entrance tomorrow morning at nine thirty for our trip to Hogsmeade," answered Professor McGonagall. "We should be back in time for lunch, and your friends are due to arrive shortly after that." She eyed his repaired shirt. "And I'll teach you the fire-proof charm once your friends arrive. I have a feeling you'll all be needing it."

Harry grinned. "Right," he answered. "I'll wait for you tomorrow morning outside the Great Hall then."

"And Harry, we will begin weekly lessons on Animagus Transformation the second week of term," she added. "You will see time set aside for this on your regular schedule."

"Really?" Harry's face lit up and he glanced at Snape to judge his reaction. Snape remained impassive, but did not look disapproving.

Professor McGonagall bade them goodnight and left through the portrait hole, leaving Snape and Harry staring at each other from across the room.

"Sit down, Harry," said Snape. He himself settled into one of the low chairs in front of the fireplace, shaking his head in exasperation—feigned or otherwise—as the extremely worn and soft chair continued to settle, leaving his knees practically in front of his face. Harry tightened his lips so as not to smile and sat down on the sofa, wedging himself into the corner in his usual position. The Half-Blood Prince's copy of Advanced Potion Making was still sitting on the table and Harry picked it up.

"This is really great," he said, looking up at Snape. He knew Snape could see his gratitude because the Professor's gaze softened a bit. "It's really going to help me this year, I can tell already. Is it…is it
alright if I tell Ron and Hermione where it came from? Hermione isn't going to like it—she's going to think I'm cheating by using it. She's really particular about fair play and all…"

Snape pursed his lips and didn't answer immediately.

"I understand if you don't want me to," said Harry quickly. "Tell them, I mean."

"There is much more than a book to consider," said Snape. "How much do you want to tell your friends about the time you spent with me? No—allow me to rephrase that. What is the minimum you will need to tell them?"

"I don't know," answered Harry. "I really hadn't thought about it much." He paused to think then said, after a moment, "That you're on our side, I suppose."

"And if I requested that you tell them nothing? That they go on believing I'm the bat of the dungeons who hates you and that you had a miserable time with me learning Occlumency?"

But Harry had not spent the past weeks with Snape without learning something about him as well and knew now that Snape wouldn't ask that of him.

"I'm not that good of an actor, sir," he answered honestly. "I would tell them that—lie to them, that is—if you asked me to, but I think they'd see through it. And Mrs. Weasley knows, after all, and Bill too."

Snape was regarding Harry steadily. "You are well aware of my situation now, Mr. Potter. How do you suggest we handle this?"

Harry met his gaze. This was hard…really hard. He wanted to tell his friends everything—that Snape grew up with his mother, that his father was a Muggle, that he had a link with him now, that he used water as his Occlumency shield just like Harry, that he had black swimming shorts that came down to his knees, that his favorite Beatle was John… But what did he need them to know? What was the minimum he could live with?

"I need them to know you're on our side," he said at last. "And that you helped me this summer—that you don't hate me anymore and I don't hate you. I guess the details aren't important."

"I believe I can live with that," replied Snape, "and perhaps a bit more. I will insist on several restrictions—you have best friends, close friends and casual friends, yes?"

"So this needs to stay just with Ron and Hermione, right?"

"Are there others that need to know?"

"I don't know…I don't think so," answered Harry. "Maybe Ginny?"

"Seeing that Ms. Weasley will be here tomorrow with Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley, I suggest you include her as well and that you tell them what you need to tell them during this visit, when there are no other ears around to overhear. And Harry, that includes Hagrid."

"What do you mean?" Harry's face fell. "Isn't he part of the Order?"

"Yes, and don't look like that." Harry tried to change his frown into a more neutral look but only made himself look impatient. "The man is utterly good—there is not an evil molecule in his body. However, he is too trusting and quite gullible. He would never intentionally hurt you or anyone he loved, but he…well, he frequents the Village taverns and has been known to discuss matters 'up't the
"I suggest you impress upon your friends the need for utter silence on this matter—let them know
that we have reached a truce, that I am working for the Order, and that my treatment of you must
appear not to have changed. You will not be able to tell them anything about Shell Cottage should
you even try—the Fidelius Charm will prevent that. And Harry, unfortunately you must not tell them
about Professor Dumbledore. You must come to me if the need to talk about it should it become too
pressing or disturbing."

Harry nodded, looking down at the book in his lap.

"What about the book?" he said.

"Tell Ms. Granger it is a gift from me and that I wanted you to have it. Leave it at that if you can. I
guarantee that your Potions marks will improve if you pay attention to this book and Ms. Granger,
being an intelligent witch, will notice. If she has issues with the book, or with your use of it, send her
to me."

"Really?" Harry looked up and grinned. Hermione wouldn't stand a chance one-to-one with Snape.
She was way too respectful of teachers to argue with him.

"Looking forward to that, are you?" answered Snape. He shook his head at Harry's smile. "I came
here mainly to discuss with you the matter of what to tell your friends. But I would also like to
remind you to continue your journaling and your meditation. Both are important and you are to
devote thirty minutes each day—I suggest at bedtime—to these activities. Write about whatever
strikes your fancy though I may, from time to time, suggest a topic."

Harry smiled again at the implication of what that meant—Snape would be watching him, would be
paying attention to what was going on with him. And he would find a way to communicate…

"Finally, I have thought long and hard about how we can continue to communicate during the
upcoming months without arousing suspicion. There are many magical ways of doing so—charmed
mirrors, for example, can act more or less like Muggle telephones." Harry's face fell, but Snape
hadn't noticed and was still talking.

"But anyone could use the mirror—it could be left out in the open unintentionally, or even stolen. It
also requires words to be spoken aloud. It simply isn't secure enough. We could use school owls, but
that would arouse too much suspicion—I receive owl post infrequently and any regular
correspondence would be noticed. Patronuses are also not feasible—yours happens to be roughly the
size of a hippopotamus and I believe even Binns would notice if a larger-than-life Stag came and
spoke to me at dinner. No, I believe the best way for us to communicate is through your Defense
homework assignments. I will expect some form of personal communication with every assignment
you turn in. You will start each with 'Dear Severus' and end with 'Regards, Harry.' Oh please don't
turn all green, Mr. Potter. My name is Severus, after all, though you've called me nothing but 'Sir' all
summer. It is time we move away from this farce, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that would be great, Severus," said Harry. He was secretly pleased and that warm feeling in
his stomach was back again. "I'm sure Malfoy and his bodyguards won't notice when I slip up in
class and use your given name."

"You won't slip up," said Snape, shaking his head in that 'Why do I have to put up with such
dunderheads?' way he had. "You will use 'Dear Severus' on the letters so that the charm I teach you
will work appropriately. It will recognize the written phrases 'Dear Severus' and ' Regards, Harry' and
replace those words and everything between them with text copied directly from the Defense
textbook. Those are not phrases typically found on homework, though 'Professor Snape' and 'Harry Potter' would be. I will simply have to cast the counter-spell to read your original notes and will write my reply in the same way."

"That's brilliant, you know," said Harry. "Though Ron is going to go nuts wondering why I'm so anxious to get Defense assignments back."

"You will have to control that," warned Snape. "You never look at your work when I return it. You cannot start now. Simply shove it in that overloaded pack of yours and continue on to your next class as always."

"Wait, how do you…? You watch me?"

"I've been watching you since you were eleven years old, Mr. Potter," returned Snape. "What, you never noticed?" He tapped himself on the temple. "Spy, remember?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's kind of creepy, you know," he said. "I mean, watching what I do with my returned assignments? I think you'd get more out of catching me out after curfew, or with my invisibility cloak…"

"Yes, about that cloak…." interrupted Snape.

"No! I mean, I might need it," said Harry.

"I am not suggesting you turn it over to me," said Snape, sounding exasperated. "I am, however, suggesting you use it only for defensive purposes—to protect yourself," he clarified. "It may also come in handy if you absolutely feel you need to see me. But you must never come to me without warning—I sometimes have visitors in my quarters who would not understand why the Boy Who Lived is knocking on my door, and though these are infrequent, it is certain Slytherin students who represent the most danger. You will use that house elf who thinks so highly of you—Dobby—send a message to me first through him. And if he cannot find me, you are not to come looking for me yourself. Is that understood?"

Harry nodded. He didn't agree, necessarily, but recognized that Snape was making many more concessions than he had to.

"Now, go fetch the chess set while I get the burn cream and jar for the fire lizard skin. I believe a sound defeat will put you in a good mood for your journal topic tonight—why Professor Snape's restrictions are sensible and sound."

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Despite being exhausted, Harry had a hard time falling asleep. Gryffindor Tower normally was home to nearly one hundred students and even in his dorm room he was used to the breathing of four other people. He read several more chapters of To Kill a Mockingbird before picking up his journal and writing a new header on a clean page. He didn't exactly follow Snape's instructions, writing about what he thought about calling Snape "Severus" instead, and managing to fill his fifteen minutes and a few more with his thoughts on that narrow topic.

He did eventually fall asleep, however, but woke in time to have a shower and a quick breakfast before meeting Professor McGonagall. She looked him over critically but apparently found him acceptable. They started off at a brisk walk toward the castle gates, talking easily about this year's Gryffindor Quidditch team who might replace Fred and George Weasley as Beaters.

Professor McGonagall prattled on about tryouts and practice schedules until they reached Gladrag's
Wizardwear. "In here, Mr. Potter," she directed. He followed her in and a male attendant, somewhere in age between Mr. Weasley and Professor Dumbledore, appeared out of nowhere. Professor McGonagall, in full lecture mode, gave him explicit directions on what they needed.

"Hogwarts robes and full uniform, Gryffindor House of course, school shoes, Quidditch shoes—he plays Seeker so as lightweight as you have them, one set of dress robes, two of casual robes and two cloaks—one lightweight for spring and fall and the other for winter. And he'll be doing a bit of growing this year and next so build in the extra fabric and expansion charms. Harry—did you get underthings this summer?"

The attendant had, by this time, determined that this would be one of his biggest sales of the summer and was practically fawning over them. He had also, it appeared, figured out that his customer was Harry Potter. Harry quickly assured Professor McGonagall that he had plenty of pants and socks and such. The loss of this potential sale didn't appear to faze Mr. Nathaniel Nettlebug (if his nametag was to be believed) and he soon had Harry on a raised dais in a curtained-off area in the rear of the shop where an enchanted tape measure was aggressively measuring him as he stood in his t-shirt and boxers with his arms held out.

Fortunately, that part lasted only ten minutes and he put his jeans and shoes back on with relief and trailed after his guardian giving input, when asked, on colors and fabrics. Harry soon learned that he'd have robes for casual occasions such as trips to Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley or visits to friends' homes for special occasions.

"Can't I just wear my school robes?" he asked.

"Of course you can wear them," answered Professor McGonagall. "I assume you have been these past years. However, most students prefer to put away their school robes on the weekend and wear their casual robes. You have noticed, haven't you? The different colors and styles?"

Harry nodded. He had noticed, of course, Malfoy had silver robes that were fitted at the waist and hung open from the waist down. Worn over trousers, they looked decidedly non-Muggle and reminded Harry of a frock coat with tails. Cho had worn the wizarding equivalent of a dress last year on their Valentine's Day date. Even Ginny and Ron had casual wizarding clothing for weekends. It had just never occurred to him that he only ever wore his school robes over either his uniform trousers and shirt or over Dudley's over-sized cast-offs.

"You are nearing the age of your majority," said Professor McGonagall an hour later as they walked briskly down the cobblestone street. She had paid what Harry considered an incredibly hefty sum for the hand-tailored clothing and had directed it to be sent to Hogwarts in her care. "It will no longer be appropriate for you to appear in Wizarding public in Muggle clothing. It may feel strange, at first, but you will grow accustomed to it over time."

She turned into The Three Broomsticks and Harry followed her without thinking.

"Hello Professor McGonagall, Harry," said a voice to their right and suddenly two people launched themselves at him and he was being hugged by both Hermione and Ginny.

"Harry! You look fantastic! What happened to you?" exclaimed Hermione, letting go of him while Ginny went in for a second hug.

"Yeah, mate," said Ron. He was trying to duck around Mrs. Weasley, who was glancing around at the other patrons and looking a trifle embarrassed. "New clothes, new glasses and I swear you're even taller."
Harry kept one arm around Ginny while he touched the rectangular frames of the glasses Snape had transfigured for him back at Shell Cottage.

"Yeah, it was time for a change, wasn't it?" said Harry, smiling broadly at his best friend. "But what about you? You sound like an American. And what's that shirt? What are Red Sox?"

"It's a professional baseball team, Harry, over in the States," answered Hermione. "You really do look wonderful. You don't stand a chance of convincing us that you were tortured all summer now."

"Only mental torture," he responded. Ron had tossed him a blue cap with a red B on it and he put it his head on as they all settled in around a table and Madam Rosemerta took their drink order.

"The glasses are great, Harry," said Ginny, reaching out to straighten the frames on his nose. "They make you look older."

"Thanks," he said. "I mean, that was a compliment, right?"

They laughed and talked through lunch and then Mrs. Weasley left to Apparate back to the Burrow while Ginny, Ron and Hermione shouldered their backpacks and joined Harry and Professor McGonagall on the walk back to Hogwarts.

Hermione was expounding on the American Revolutionary War and someone called Paul Revere while Ron made faces behind her back and Ginny managed to look both interested and amused, when Harry was suddenly nearly crippled with intense, burning pain in his scar. They were inside the gates, close to Hagrid's hut, and he dropped to the ground on his side, drawing up his knees, unbelievably on auto-pilot and trying very hard to concentrate on his Occlumency barrier without slipping into it…not just yet.

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, while Ginny dropped down beside him.

"Get back!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall. "He needs space now, and quiet!"

Harry ignored his friends, tuning them out, eyes squinting against the pain while he looked up toward the castle doors, waiting.

"Harry, Occlude!" urged Professor McGonagall. She, too, looked toward the castle where a figure, all in black, had appeared on the steps and was now hurrying down toward them.

"It's Snape!" hissed Ron.

Snape slowed only slightly as he passed them, pausing to address Harry firmly.

"Occlude, Harry. Now!"

Unbelievably, Harry seemed to relax, and Snape continued running down the hill and out the gates where he Disapparated with a crack. The sound seemed to echo back up to the hill long after he was gone.

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Chapter 42

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"Harry?" Fingers were waving in front of his face and the small part of his consciousness he had left open to the outside world finally registered their movement. He blinked and the fingers came into focus along with a hand and an arm. His protective bubble seemed to sink into the ground and he felt sun and air against his skin instead of water.

"You don't do things by halves, do you mate?" asked Ron, who was sitting on the grass next to Harry. "I mean, you left a few weeks ago with Snape to learn Occlumency and now you're so good at it that you're practically comatose when you Occlude."

Harry stared at Ron for a moment, registering first that he was talking and second that he was trying to make a joke. He sat up and rubbed grass and dirt off of his cheek. "How long…?” he asked, looking for Professor McGonagall.

"She went up to the castle a few minutes after you went down. She said she had to speak with Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione. She had an expression on her face that Harry thought was a mixture of worry and interest, with the interest part bordering on excitement. "She told us to stay with you and to wave a hand in front of your face if you weren't awake in half an hour but not to touch you or disturb you otherwise. And to come directly back to the Great Hall once you were awake," she added, glancing a bit worriedly back up toward the castle.

"Yeah," said Harry, still trying to return to full consciousness. He idly rubbed his scar. No pain anymore, not even a twinge.

"What happened?" asked Ginny. She was sitting on the grass next to Hermione and opposite Harry and Ron. "Is it like last year? Can you feel when he's angry? He's not trying to…to…possess you again, like at the Ministry?"

"No!" said Harry very quickly. He didn't quite shout it, but Ginny looked startled. "I mean, he's not attacking me directly or trying to possess me. It's happened a couple other times this summer, when he calls the Death Eaters. He must be really angry when he does it," he added, feeling a little guilty for the easy lie.

"Aren't you supposed to be…well…functional…when you Occlude?" asked Hermione.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. I'm still having trouble with splitting my consciousness. Snape says my barrier is almost too good—I get lost behind it. But they're not really too concerned about it. I don't think they care if I'm functional or not when I'm Occluding—just that I'm blocking the pain and that Voldemort can't get in."

"They? Who do you mean, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"Oh, yeah. Snape and Dumbledore," he answered.

"It's so good that you've finally managed it," said Hermione. "I knew you could do it once you got over your problems with Professor Snape. You'll have to teach me, you know. Do you feel like walking back up to the castle now?"

Ron pulled Harry to his feet and all four of them began the trek up the hill to the front entrance. Harry turned his head several times to glance back at the gates but there was no sign of Snape. He tried to mentally let it go—he was home, back at Hogwarts, with his best friends and he had more than a week until classes started again. His summer work was done. His friends would be here for
two more days. The weather was beautiful—perfect for a dip in the lake. Snape would be alright, he'd be fine. He always was...he always came back...

Yet when they had climbed the stairs to the great oak doors, when Ron was pulling the handle and holding the door open for all of them, Harry looked back one more time. Still no sign of Snape. Reluctantly, Harry squared his shoulders and went inside with his friends.

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"...and they don't even have dormitories there—the students Apparate home every night. They let them Apparate at fourteen in the States, you know...something about how far apart everything is there." Hermione had been rattling on and on about the Salem Magical Youth Institute. Harry had found it rather interesting at first, especially the parts about Quidditch in the States, which were mostly supplied by Ron and Ginny, and how American witches and wizards had whole courses devoted to the study of Native American magic. Ron and Ginny had started a rather competitive game of Exploding Snap which Ron was now calling "Exploding Snape." Hermione had humored him and charmed a pair of pictures on the Snap cards to look like Snape, but had insisted on adding Professor McGonagall, Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid too, so that the deck began to resemble a Faculty yearbook. Harry didn't know how to tell him not to call the game that, but it grated on his nerves each time Ron said it. Finally, he interrupted Hermione's description of the flying bicycles in Olde Salem (which actually had interested him quite a bit).

"Ron, could you not call it that, please?" He tried to keep his voice neutral, but Ron was having none of it.

"It's a joke, Harry! What's wrong with you? Have you gone all soft on the greasy git? Did he tuck you in at night and read you bedtime stories?"

Ron couldn't have known how much that particular comment hurt. He'd managed to starkly call up one of Harry's deepest longings—to have had someone there for him when he was a child. He closed his eyes and mentally counted to ten. When he opened them again, Ron and Ginny had paused their game and, with Hermione, were staring at him.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked Ginny. "Has Ron gone and said the wrong thing again?" She shot Ron one of those withering looks that little sisters are allowed to give their big brothers, but perhaps with more venom than absolutely necessary.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered, taking a deep breath. He needed to do this now, before anything else came up. He didn't need to keep defending Snape. His friends needed to stop insulting him.

"Actually, Snape and I got to know each other a lot better this summer. We've agreed to a truce. I know he's not ever going to be anyone's favorite teacher, and you don't even have to like him, but I do. I mean, I like him. He...he can be funny even. And he's on our side. That's the one thing you have to believe. He's part of the Order and he's working for Dumbledore."

"Wait! Did you say you like him?" repeated Ron. "I mean, I understand you had to work with him to learn Occlumency and live with him and all, but I was hoping for stories about how he wears the same underwear for weeks on end and never bathes and makes you eat boiled parsnips for pudding and sleeps in a coffin..."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione. She really looked angry. "Be sensitive, won't you? Harry has obviously bonded with Professor Snape and you're going to have to get used to it. Really, Harry, I think it's great," she said, turning her focus to Harry from Ron. "Professor Dumbledore trusts him and so should we."
"Well, I don't have to like him," said Ron with an exaggerated sigh. "But won't Malfoy and the other Slytherins wet themselves when Snape treats you like a human being in class? Maybe he'll even dock points off Slytherin if they sabotage your potions! Can you imagine the looks on their faces?"

"Yeah, Ron, about that…" began Harry. He was actually glad that Ron had brought that up. It saved him from having to figure out a way to introduce the subject of how Snape would be treating him into their conversation. But for some reason, he didn't clear up Ron's assumption that Snape would be teaching Potions again.

"No, really! Can't you see it? Draco Malfoy gets ten points docked and…"

"Ron," interrupted Harry. "That's not going to happen. Nothing's going to change in class or in public. He has to treat me the same as always."

Ron stared at him a minute. A look of understanding came over his face. "You mean like crap, then?" said Ron. "How can you say you like him…that you have a truce with him…when he's going to keep treating you like you're the dog doo on the bottom of his shoe?" Ron's voice was rising, getting properly indignant. Ron reacting like this, loyal to a fault, warmed his heart as much as it annoyed him.

"Ron," said Hermione as she wedged herself on the sofa beside him. Ginny, sitting on the floor on the other side of the low sofa table, had gathered the cards up into an untidy pile. "Snape's a spy." Hermione whispered that last word and looked around to make sure no Slytherins were peeking out of the fireplace or hiding under the potted plants near the window. "He can't just up and be friends with Harry. Think about it! He's back…Voldemort's back. Some of the Slytherin's parents are Death Eaters. They'd report back in a heartbeat if Snape started being nice to Harry."

Ron opened his mouth, closed it again. "Oh, yeah…I guess you're right," he said, turning so red that his freckles on his nose seemed to join together to look like one giant nose-sized freckle. He turned to Harry. "I'm sorry mate. Hermione's right. Sometimes I don't think before I talk."

"Sometimes?" said Ginny. "Like when you asked that girl sitting across from us on our trip back to London what a Game Boy was?"

"I didn't know!" he said. "How was I supposed to know that nearly every kid in the US and Great Britain had one? It was making all sorts of annoying noise and I was trying to sleep!"

"Hey, it's really alright," said Harry. "I mean, I understand why Snape has to keep acting like he hates me and I'll just have to take it. At least I'll know it's an act, that things really are different between us, no matter how many points he takes or how many detentions he gives me."

"Or how many times he humiliates you," added Ron.

"Yeah, that too. Thanks, Ron." Harry looked at his friend rather crossly.

They ate dinner in the Great Hall. Harry immediately looked for Snape, but he didn't appear during dinner or during the time afterward that they spent in the Hall playing miniature golf. Ron, Hermione and Ginny had played it in Boston, though Hermione said you could find mini golf courses in the UK too. They described it to Professor Dumbledore and he and Professor McGonagall transfigured forks into clubs and napkin rings into different colored golf balls. It took a bit of time for them to get the hang of the courses themselves, but they soon had nine holes complete with windmills, loop-the-loops, a water jump and plenty of banks and bumpers. Ron was absolutely horrid at the game, managing to knock his ball across several holes on most shots. He got an unlikely hole-in-one which Hermione refused to count as he had teed off on hole four but sunk the ball in hole seven. Ginny,
however, was a natural and Harry and Hermione played passably. The surprise was Professor McGonagall, who gave Ginny a run for her money and ended up playing quite dirty, managing to knock Ginny's ball out of position a fair number of times.

At nine o'clock, Professor McGonagall sent everyone back to Gryffindor Tower, but asked Harry to meet her in her office in a few minutes.

"There's something I haven't told you yet," he said to his friends as they walked up toward Gryffindor Tower. "I have a new guardian. Dumbledore actually got the Dursleys to sign me over to Professor McGonagall."

"So that's what Mom was going on about!" exclaimed Ron. "She and Dad were talking at the breakfast table today all hush hush but I heard her say something like 'Minerva won't spoil him like we would.'"

Harry laughed. "I don't think she'll spoil me, but it might feel like it after the Dursleys…." He trailed off out of habit.

"Well, personally I'm glad it's Minerva and not Mum and Dad," said Ginny. "I have enough big brothers as it is." She added that with a little wink in Harry's direction that made him blush and look at his feet.

They parted at the staircase, Harry turning to go on to McGonagall's office and Ron, Hermione and Ginny continuing to Gryffindor Tower. He stumbled suddenly as a sharp pain stabbed at him, pulsing through his scar. By the time he reached the office door, he was holding his head with his right hand and clutching his left arm against his body.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," called Professor McGonagall. She looked up at him as he entered, then stood in alarm. "What is it Harry?" She moved quickly around the desk and led him to a chair while he continued to hold his head and his arm, his face white.

"What is it?" she asked again.

Harry tried not to cry out. The sharp pain had ebbed but continued to radiate with occasional spikes. It didn't feel like the Cruciatus at all and he resisted the impulse to Occlude to end it.

"Snape," he replied, panting. "Where is he?"

"Harry, Severus is back in his quarters, here at Hogwarts. He arrived while we were eating dinner. Has something happened?" She watched him nod and drop his head to his knees. "Stay right there—I'll check on him now." She pointed her wand at the fire, making it flare up, and was gone seconds later with a flash of Floo powder.

Five minutes later, the pain in both his head and his arm suddenly disappeared, leaving only a vague throbbing. Five minutes after that, the door to the office opened and Professor Dumbledore walked in.

"Harry, Minerva said I'd find you here," he began.

"What happened to Snape?" he said, standing up and facing the Headmaster.

"Harry, sit down. Professor McGonagall is down with Professor Snape. He was quite worn out when he returned from his…meeting…earlier and decided to take a relaxing bath. He managed to trip and fall while getting out, hitting his head on the tub and breaking his arm in the process. Professor McGonagall has called in Madam Pomfrey and they are taking care of him in his quarters."
I believe he was quite surprised to find Minerva staring down at him on his bathroom floor."

"Oh," said Harry. He rubbed his head then stretched his left arm. "I think they've given him a pain potion."

"They have," said Dumbledore. "Are you feeling well enough to return to your dormitory? Professor McGonagall simply wanted to tell you that Severus had returned and was fine."

Harry smiled at the irony. "I'm fine. Will you tell him...Professor Snape, that is...that I'm glad he's back? And to be more careful in the bathroom or I'll have to send Dobby in to supervise his baths?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I will."

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Harry and his friends spent the better part of Thursday at the lake swimming and sitting on a blanket in the sun talking. Hagrid made an appearance just after lunch, wearing, to the shock of all, a pair of enormous orange swimming shorts.

"Wow!" exclaimed Ron. "The entire Chudley Cannon Quidditch Team must have donated their uniforms to get enough fabric for those shorts!"

"Those are more than orange," whispered Harry to Hermione. "They're the color of traffic cones!"

Hagrid didn't appear to be wearing a shirt, but the hair on his chest and back was so thick it looked like he had on a dark, wooly vest. Hagrid devised a fun game wherein he stood upright in almost three meters of water and Ron, Harry and Ginny would take turns and swim out and dive off of his shoulders. They even talked Hermione into trying it once. She stood on one broad shoulder while Ginny stood on the other. They grabbed hands and jumped together, Hermione screaming until she went underwater.

After an early dinner, they stole away to the Room of Requirement, where Hermione, walking back and forth in front of the blank wall, managed to get the room to create a fair representation of her parents' living room complete with television, VCR and Super Nintendo game console. It was a lot of fun to watch Ron with the game controllers. He played like a six-year old, moving his whole body with the controller as he attempted to get Mario back on top of Yoshi and navigate through the Ghost Houses. Hermione's parents turned out to be movie buffs too, and they watched Toy Story and Babe while eating popcorn and drinking Coke then settled down to watch The Usual Suspects. They all four squeezed onto the green and white striped sofa which stretched a bit to accommodate them. Hermione and Ron ended up on one side and Ginny and Harry on the other. With Ginny cuddled against him, sharing a bowl of popcorn, Harry wondered if life could get much better and quite forgot about Voldemort for several hours.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny had to leave the next afternoon but Professor McGonagall allowed them to spend the morning on the Quidditch Pitch. Hermione excelled at everything magical—except flying—so Ron took her up on a slow-moving school broom. Harry was fairly certain it was a ploy by Ron to get Hermione to wrap her arms around him in that viselike grip. He wondered if Ron's circulation was cut off because once or twice he looked like he wasn't getting blood to his head at all and had a vague, startled expression on his face. Ginny, though she had proven quite cuddly last night, was all business on a broom and she and Harry tossed a quaffle back and forth and later took shots on Ron while he and Hermione together guarded the goal.

After a rather raucous picnic lunch on the grounds near Hagrid's hut and a trip to admire the growing fire lizards (they were old enough to handle now and Ron kept turning over the orange ones in
wonder), Harry hugged his friends goodbye as they Flooed away, one after the other, back to the Burrow. Ginny was the last to go, and she gave him a quick kiss on the mouth before tossing in her handful of Floo powder.

"Wow, thanks!" he called after her, feeling a bit light-headed and slightly foolish. You weren't supposed to thank a girl for a kiss, were you?

The afternoon, a long, boring, uneventful afternoon, loomed before him. He considered going back down to see Hagrid but he'd gotten several more blisters on his fingers and didn't want to tempt fate anymore. Professor McGonagall had returned to her office, leaving him with an open invitation to come up and help her sort supplies if he grew bored. He didn't think he could ever be that bored. He was still in the small room behind the Great Hall, the room he'd been sent to after his name appeared out of the Goblet of Fire, and he wandered back into the Great Hall.

Snape was standing in the doorway between the Great Hall and the castle Entrance. Harry had not seen him even once since he had hurried toward the Hogwarts gates Wednesday afternoon. Oddly, Snape was dressed in Muggle trousers and a short-sleeved blue polo.

"Are they gone?" he called across the corridor.

"Yes, it's safe to come out now," teased Harry, walking toward him. He could see Snape roll his eyes, even at this distance. "How's your arm?"

Snape twisted it this way and that. "Fine," he answered, "and it will remain so even without that house elf babysitting me in my bath."

Harry grinned.

"So you're ready to go then?" asked Snape.

"Go? Go where?" asked Harry.

"You asked for one more weekend before term started," said Snape. "This is it." He tossed Harry a stuffed backpack. "Professor McGonagall did me the favor of going to your dorm and packing a bag for you. I didn't think my heart could stand two visits to the Gryffindor Common Room in a single week. I certainly hope you didn't have dirty underwear in your drawer."

Harry grinned and adjusted the backpack on his shoulders.

"So where are we going, anyway?"

Snape didn't answer, instead leading Harry out the front door and down the stairs. They walked together amicably past Hagrid's hut and out the gates with their winged boars. Snape stopped and turned toward Harry.

"Hold on," he said, taking Harry's arm and turning on the spot.

They popped back into existence a moment later in the middle of a noisy sidewalk, but no one seemed to notice. A bright yellow and blue bus with "Magical Mystery Tour" emblazoned on the side in rainbow colors stopped right in front of them and Snape produced tickets out of his pocket. Snape handed one to Harry and said "Welcome to Liverpool."

Chapter 43
THE LAST WEEK

Harry had spent the week after returning from Liverpool with Snape helping the professors, who had all come back to Hogwarts to get ready for the term, set up their classrooms and prepare supplies. His favorite times had been the afternoons spent with Hagrid and the new creatures he'd rounded up for his classes this year, including, of course, the fire lizards. But Hagrid also had eighteen owlets that the first and second years would be raising. The owls would eventually go to Eeylops Owlery in Diagon Alley to be trained as post owls, but not until they reached full maturity. Now they were tiny hatchlings, balls of feathers and fuzz in brown, white and every conceivable combination. Hagrid fed the eager little things by sticking tiny pieces of fresh meat on the end of a stick. The trick was to make sure that each owlet was fed during each feeding and with the way they attacked the food and swarmed wherever the stick went, this was easier said than done.

After feeding the owlets, Harry would gather the pieces of dry skin in the fire lizard enclosure for Snape and Slughorn—Snape had not given up his quarters in the dungeon even though he'd no longer be teaching Potions and still did quite a bit of brewing in his spare time. He kept a big jar of Snape's burn cream at Hagrid's to use after the fire lizard skin collecting—he'd learned that Snape always checked first for burns and blisters and that there'd be less time for chess or late-evening discussions on the meaning of song lyrics if he had to spend time treating his burns.

Every night during that week between Liverpool and the start of term, he snuck down to Snape's quarters at nine o'clock under his invisibility cloak, always sending Dobby down first to make sure Snape was alone. He understood that their newfound "truce" shouldn't even be made known to all the teachers at Hogwarts, so he respected that during the day, avoiding Snape, trying not to look at him during meals they shared, looking at the floor with a muttered "Excuse me, Sir," if they happened to pass in the corridor.

Once, while passing Snape in front of the hospital wing after he stacked teacups (to be transfigured later by fourth years into cordial glasses) for Professor McGonagall for an hour, nearly making him miss lunch, his stomach growled loudly.

"Potter!" exclaimed Snape.

Harry jumped, startled. "Yes sir?" he asked, gritting his teeth and looking over Snape's shoulder where Professor Slughorn and Professor Vector has stopped in their tracks and were looking back at him.

"What is that thing on your lip?" growled Snape. Harry looked at the floor. Snape was playing dirty now. He'd just been teasing Harry the night before, over another game of chess that Harry had handily lost, about the sparse hair growing on his lip. He composed his face into as neutral an expression as possible.

"I'm sorry, Sir," he replied. "Is it dirty? I must have gotten some ink on it when I was helping Professor McGonagall."

"It's not ink, Potter!" groused Snape. "Are you not aware of the Hogwarts dress code? No facial hair! Get up to your dormitory and shave that off now!"

"But what about Millicent Bulstrode?" he exclaimed. "She has a moustache and you don't make her shave it off!"

"Potter! Ten points from Gryffindor. Now get to your dorm and get that thing off your lip!"
"But it’s summer!" exclaimed Harry. "You can't take points. The hourglasses aren't even counting yet!"

By now, Madam Pomfrey had come out into the corridor to see what the ruckus was and both Slughorn and Vector had drifted in closer.

"Detention!" exclaimed Snape. His face was twisted into a very Snapish sneer.

"You can't do that either!" shouted Harry. "Classes haven't even started. He whirled around to look at the other professors. "Isn't that right, Madam Pomfrey? Can I get points off and detention when it's still summer holiday?"

"Now, Severus," cajoled Madam Pomfrey, turning to her colleague. "Mr. Potter is rather late in getting facial hair. He probably wasn't even aware of the Hogwarts policy regarding it. Perhaps you could let me take care of it? I can teach him a handy shaving charm while he helps me get the bedpans ready for term."

Wow! Not *that* was sneaky! Snape and Pomfrey tag-teaming against him! He'd given Snape the most hateful look he could muster before stomping into the infirmary after Madam Pomfrey, closing the door loudly behind him. She'd already disappeared into her office and he followed her there.

"Not fair!" he said. "It's bad enough having to keep a straight face when HE does that without you having to gang up on me with him!"

Madam Pomfrey just smiled. "Be glad the bedpans haven't been used for several months, then, Harry," she said. "Now wait a few minutes for the corridor to clear and get on down to the Great Hall for lunch. I can hear your stomach rumbling from over here."

But it was Snape, not Madam Pomfrey, who taught him the shaving charm that night. They'd sat together in Snape's cozy sitting room, looking at a great anthology on the Beatles that Snape had purchased in Liverpool.

"Do you like them shaggy or clean-cut?" asked Harry, staring at a page that juxtaposed two photos, one from the early '60s and one from 1969.

"Shaggy, like you," Snape commented dryly. He stood up and beckoned to Harry. "Come with me."

Harry followed him down the short hallway to the door on the left. The bathroom must have had a wizard space charm on it, like the tents they'd used at the Quidditch World Cup. Snape ignored the obvious elephant in the room—the humongous sunken tub that was about the size of the Gryffindor Common Room—and stood in front of the mirror over the long vanity. He leaned in to examine the stubble on his chin then, apparently finding it satisfactory, pulled out his wand.

"My father was a Muggle so my mother taught me this charm," he said without other introduction. "I will spare you the indignity of Madam Pomfrey having to teach you. Watch closely."

"Cutis Sedis," he said as he moved the tip of his wand across his upper lip, not quite touching it. The hair on his lip vanished. He repeated the spell on his cheeks and chin, then turned to Harry.

"Try it. The incantation is 'Cutis Sedis,'—if done properly, it will remove the hair and smooth your skin as well."

Harry stopped staring at Snape, half bewildered, half overwhelmed, and turned to face the mirror. Like Snape had done, he leaned in to examine the growth of hair on his face. His moustache
resembled not much more than an ink smudge, though it was definitely coming in as dark as his hair. There were a few straggly hairs on his chin and a very fine line on the edge of his jawbone. He straightened and took out his wand, catching Snape's eyes in the mirror as he started to lift it to his lip.

"What was that incantation again?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to mess this up and remove my lip or anything." The real problem, of course, was that his hands were shaking too hard to hold his wand steady. He wasn't supposed to have moments like this, least of all with Snape. He'd learned to ride a bike on his own when he was seven, salvaging one of Dudley's cast-offs and pushing it over to Wisteria Drive so the Dursleys didn't see him scraping up his knees and ruining Dudley's good cast-off jeans. He'd played football in the school yard, surprisingly agile and quick on his feet, but the older boys had been the ones to teach him. Madam Hooch had taught him to ride a broom and the Weasleys had taken him to his first professional Quidditch game. He should be learning to shave by himself, or picking it up from one of the other Gryffindor boys (Dean had been shaving since fourth year, after all). That's how his life went. That's how it worked. He didn't have moments like this, moments typically reserved for fathers and sons.

Snape, however, seemed to understand. Levity was needed. "Try not to make the spell too powerful," he said, his usual sarcasm as present as always. "The Slytherin dorm is rather close and the residual magic might affect Miss Bulstrode's facial hair when she arrives."

"Git," muttered Harry, smiling lopsidedly as he raised his wand and tried the charm for the first time. He rubbed his finger over his upper lip to test the result.

"Not bad for a beginner," he said. He looked down into the sink, noting the light stubble that dotted the white porcelain. It reminded him for a moment of Saturday mornings at the Dursleys when he'd had to clean Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's bathroom. He'd hated cleaning the sink with Uncle Vernon's beard stubble in it. He shook the thought away, picturing instead Aunt Petunia shaving her chin and hiding the razor away so no one would suspect.

"Another game of chess?" asked Harry to Snape, still looking at him in the mirror. "I suspect I'll play better now that I've improved my rakish good looks."

"Prepare to lose, Mr. Depp," said Snape. He stood to the side so Harry could exit the bathroom first. As Harry walked past him, Snape reached out his hand and moved his thumb over Harry's upper lip. Harry froze at the gentle touch, wanting to run from it and lean into it at the same time.

"Not bad at all for a beginner," said Snape. "But then again, you're hardly a beginner when it comes to growing up."

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Everyone, literally everyone (even some bold first years who had likely never seen him in person before) commented on his glasses. He hadn't taken the Hogwarts Express back to Hogwarts, considering he was already at Hogwarts. But he had gone to Hogsmeade Station with Hagrid to meet the train and to ride back to the castle with his friends in the thestral-drawn carriages. All six of them had crammed into one carriage, Hermione sitting a bit reluctantly in Ron's lap while Ginny, Luna and Harry all crammed together in one seat and Neville settled in next to Ron.

The sorting had been quick, the first-years obediently lining up to meet their fate, and when the feast began, thirteen new Gryffindors sat at the house table, including a pair of twin boys with blonde hair that somehow reminded Harry of Fred and George. It would be quiet around Hogwarts without those two, he mused. They'd tramped up to Gryffindor Tower after the feast and Harry had given each of his Gryffindor friends the gifts he'd purchased in Liverpool.
He could hardly believe it had been a week since they'd returned. For nearly forty-eight hours last weekend, Snape and Harry had lived the Beatles. Snape had succumbed to nearly every tour, promotion, restaurant, store and photo opp devoted to the Beatles in Liverpool. They'd stayed at the Hard Day's Night Hotel, and while they'd gone for the more modest "Luxury Room," Snape had done a surreptitious spell on the elevator controls to get them to the limited access floor with the Lennon and McCartney suites. A quick Alohomora had gotten them into the currently vacant Lennon Suite for a quick tour before they'd returned to their own room, laughing at their bravado.

Now, Harry pulled out the rolled up t-shirts he'd bought in Liverpool at the hotel's gift shop. Ron got the Yellow Submarine shirt while Ginny and Hermione received "All You Need is Love" shirts and Neville the classic Abbey Road tee. For Luna, he'd purchased an extremely bright tie-dyed shirt featuring the Magical Mystery Tour. He'd give it to her later when he had the chance.

"This is great, Harry," said Ron, pulling off his school robe and pulling his shirt over his head, right on top of his uniform shirt while the girls and Neville did the same. He looked disapprovingly at Ginny's rather tight shirt and more approvingly at Hermione's equally fitted one.

"Did you go on holiday this summer, Harry?" asked Neville. "These shirts are great! I didn't know you liked the Beatles."

"Everyone loves the Beatles," answered Harry.

"Did you get a shirt too, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"Yeah. I did." He opened his chest drawer and pulled out his own simple t-shirt. It was light blue with a simple line-drawing of John Lennon done in navy and a single word, Imagine, across the bottom. It stood out in its simplicity when compared with the other shirts. He tossed his robes on his bed, and pulled on the shirt just as the others had done.

Hermione stared at Harry a long time. She chewed on her bottom lip, looking like she was trying to keep from crying. "Perfect, Harry," she said at last. She enveloped him in a hug. For a moment he felt like the war was over and they had their whole lives ahead of them to live. It was easy…if he tried.

Chapter 44

HOW IT ALL PLAYED OUT

The meetings with McGonagall began the second week of Harry's sixth year. The meetings with Dumbledore began the third.

He excelled in Potions that year, finding the Half Blood Prince to be an excellent teacher, despite Hermione's only grudging acceptance of his unconventional tutor. He did well in Defense also, though barely able to tolerate Snape's treatment of him. He took out his frustration in his almost daily letters to Snape in his homework assignments and Snape, to his credit, almost never commented on his biting tone.

With McGonagall, he explored his Animagus form, knowing from his meditative state when they met to practice that, if he succeeded, he wouldn't be ferocious or fearsome or winged or magical.
He'd be gentle and watchful. He'd be an ordinary animal, unrecognizable as Harry Potter.

With Dumbledore, he explored the twisted mind of Tom Riddle, and he learned about Horcruxes, and he knew, he knew without a doubt, that he himself was a Horcrux, or had one buried inside his scar. He scratched at his scar in his sleep, while he dreamed, making it red and raw, and Snape's next note to him said "We'll get him out some way, but it will take more than your fingernails." He began to think about how he could survive, how he would survive, if it was possible to destroy a Horcrux without destroying his own soul in the process. He never told Dumbledore he knew. But when he left the Burrow over Christmas holiday for a long weekend at Shell Cottage with Snape, they talked about it for hours and hours. Harry still thought he'd have to die so that Voldemort would die as well. "The Prophecy doesn't state that the one who lives has to go on living," he said.

He watched Ron make the colossal mistake of dating Lavender Brown while Hermione pretended not to be hurt. He pined after Ginny while comforting Hermione.

He had two very long detentions with Snape. He'd deserved both of them, acting out in class aggressively until Snape had no choice but to dock points and assign detention. In the first, he tried to get Snape to tell him what was going on with Draco Malfoy. In the second, he cried because Dumbledore was dying and duelled with Snape to get it out of his system.

He followed Draco Malfoy around the castle, obsessed with whatever it was Malfoy was doing, convinced it would come to no good, no matter what Snape told him to the contrary.

He hadn't enrolled in Care of Magical Creatures himself, but he often went down to Hagrid's hut after classes, marveled at the owlets' growth and drank lukewarm tea out of gallon-sized teacups.

He wrote notes to Snape with every Defense assignment. Snape wrote back on his corrected homework. He knew he should pay more attention to his assignments and less to the letters, but he couldn't quite make himself.

He didn't particularly enjoy being Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, but it looked like they'd have a good year—that is until Katie Bell was cursed and they had to get yet another new player to fill her spot.

When Ron almost died, poisoned on Mead meant for Dumbledore but given to Slughorn, Harry understood what best friends were worth. When Ginny kissed him in front of everyone in the Gryffindor common room after the Quidditch match he'd missed while in detention with Snape, he understood why best friends has sisters. His letters to Snape took on a new tone. If he'd been able to see Snape read those letters, the highlight of every night when he had to mark assignments, he'd have realized that Snape wanted him to have an ordinary life, a smart and fun girl like Ginny to date, no problem bigger than what to wear to the Yule Ball.

Harry learned about altered memories. He drank Liquid Luck to convince Slughorn to give him the real memory Dumbledore wanted. On the short half-term break in early Spring, when most of the students went home for the week, he took Snape and Dumbledore down to the Chamber of Secrets where Snape walked around the basilisk skeleton at least three times before grabbing Harry in a tight hug, muttering something like "you were only twelve" into the astonished teen's neck. Harry cried into Snape's robes, but he had no idea why.

The frequent meetings with Dumbledore where they tried to get inside Tom Riddle's psyche, tried to determine which objects contained fragments of his splintered soul, tried to pick a path through the tangled wreckage of a damaged, poisoned mind, wore Harry down. It didn't help, either, that Dumbledore was growing progressively weaker, though his eyes never lost their sparkle. Harry tortured himself over how similar he and Riddle were, how he could have turned out just like
Voldemort, orphaned and alone, bitter and vengeful. But you didn't, Snape told him in one of his letters. "You are Harry Potter. You will never be Lord anybody."

In January, four months after starting Animagus studies with Professor McGonagall, Harry Potter transformed into Prongs' counterpart, a lithe young doe, while sitting on Professor McGonagall's loveseat. He rolled off the sofa in surprise, all gangly legs, hitting the floor and trying to scramble onto four hooved feet on the smooth wooden floors. Professor McGonagall looked immensely pleased. "I thought as much," she said, transfiguring a chair into a full-length mirror so Harry could see what he had become. He stared into the mirror for a long time, transfixed by the large gentle eyes. His doe still had the light spots of an almost-mature fawn. Her ears were long, her tail was white underneath as he flicked it. His face had normal markings—no glasses, round or rectangular, were imprinted on his face.

When he transformed back, with the usual difficulty a first-timer always had in letting go of that animal instinct and the battle between human and animal consciousness, Minerva Floo-called Severus. He joined them in her small office and she asked Harry to transform again. Severus stood there, staring at Harry the doe with a look of such joy and such pain that Harry immediately transformed back and Minerva explained, while Snape sat down and wept, that Lily's Patronus was a doe, and Snape's was as well. Snape's grief washed over him, and Harry felt it through their connection, felt the waves of guilt, and regret and loss. He took two steps closer to Snape, almost overcome, then once again became the doe, walking closer to Snape, pushing against him with a warm nose until Snape wrapped his arms around his furred neck and hugging him, cried some more.

It all went to pieces at the end of the year. Snape's letters to Harry were becoming more direct. "Do not use that spell," he said, responding to Harry's queries about a spell in the Half Blood Prince's potions book "for enemies." "It will flail the skin…I should have erased that from the book before I gave it to you." Other spells had been more useful, like the Muffliato, which even Hermione now used for privacy. But the night came when Dumbledore took Harry from the castle to a dank, remote cave to find a Horcrux, and Harry forced him to drink a terrible potion and, on their return to Hogwarts, the Dark Mark had hovered over the castle. Harry had spent hours in doe-form the last few months, hiding from his painful connection to Snape as Snape was summoned more and more frequently. But tonight, unbelievably, there was no pain. Harry flew with a weakened Dumbledore back to the Astronomy Tower and from there, his world almost fell apart. He found out that Draco had, indeed, been up to something. Draco disarmed the Headmaster while Harry remained frozen, petrified by Dumbledore's spell, still covered by his invisibility cloak. He heard Draco's plot, watched the other Death Eaters come—here, inside Hogwarts, invading his very home—and then watched in grief-stricken horror as Snape himself appeared on the Tower, lifted his wand, pointed it at a pleading Dumbledore, and said the words that would end his life.

Harry heard Dumbledore's plea. It is time, Severus. End it now. Save the boys' life. End it now, Severus. I am dying... Legimency had come so easily to him after Occlumency was mastered. As the Headmaster's body flew over the turret walls, they all fled. Snape had not seen Harry, but had he known he was there? The spell holding Harry in place failed as life left Dumbledore and Harry screamed his rage, chasing after Snape. You can't leave! He shouldn't have made you do it! I need you! He tripped over bodies on his way down the stairs after Snape and Draco and the other Death Eaters. He chased them over the lawn and he knew, he knew Snape wanted him to go inside, to get out of the line of fire, to go on without him but he couldn't do it. He couldn't let him go. Not now. Not with what had happened. A line had been drawn and Harry was utterly, irrevocably alone. Dumbledore was dead. Snape had killed him. Snape was gone now. But no one had seen him kill Dumbledore. No one except the Death Eaters...and Harry.

The next days were numb. There was a funeral for Dumbledore, but Snape wasn't there. His "defection" put him solidly in Voldemort's camp in everyone's eyes. Even some of the Order began
to doubt him. Harry told Ron and Hermione about the Horcruxes and what he had to do to find and destroy them. They both vowed to stand by him, to go with him, no matter what happened. He silently vowed to go alone and leave them with their lives and families.

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Summer passed oh-so-slowly for Harry.

He went to Shell Cottage with Bill after it became obvious that Hogwarts was under increasing Ministry control and he was no longer safe there. Arthur became the new Secret Keeper and the Fidelius charm was renewed. He told Bill what had happened on the tower—Bill had been at Hogwarts that night and had been attacked by the werewolf Fenrir Greyback, His face was now horribly scarred. Bill told him that things were tense at the Ministry, that Voldemort would soon have it under his control. Everyone was nervous, scared. He and Harry practiced dueling on the beach, and Harry found himself spending more and more time in his Animagus form as Snape suffered the cruel attention of his master.

Harry never told Bill about the Horcruxes, or that he had a piece of Voldemort's soul trapped inside him.

They left Shell Cottage, Harry in disguise, on Harry's seventeenth birthday. An owl had arrived that morning with a letter and a package. The fact that it made its way to the Fidelius-protected Shell Cottage puzzled Harry and worried Bill, but Harry opened the parcel at the kitchen table after Bill checked it for curses.

It was a watch.

"Traditional gift for a Wizard's seventeenth," said Bill, picking it up and admiring it. "This is an old one, Harry. A rather nice one, I'd say."

Harry was staring at the note in his hand. There was no greeting, and no signature.

"I've come to depend quite heavily on my mantel clock these past weeks, though I've had to disguise it and put it in a secure location. As the hand seems to be always point to "Somewhere Safe," I took a chance on where to find you and used the Headmaster's owl, which I seem to have inherited. Lemon Drop (yes, I detest the name but he will not respond to any other) knows the place well. I thought it would be appropriate for you to have a timepiece of your own, although this one does nothing but tell time—though it is waterproof. It was my grandfather Prince's."

Harry put the watch on and didn't take it off for a very long time.

The Minister of Magic himself showed up at the Burrow on the morning of Bill's wedding to Fleur and gathered Ron, Hermione and Harry in the sitting room where he read parts of Dumbledore's will and gave them strange bequeaths. Harry put his snitch in the small leather pouch—the one from Hagrid that stretched invisibly and held quite a lot—that he wore around his neck. Hermione looked curiously at the wizard children's storybook and Ron played with the small silver device that sucked the light out from candles and lamps.

The wedding was ruined when Kingley's Patronus arrived, telling them that the Ministry had been taken over, that the Minister was dead, and that Death Eaters were on their way. Hermione grabbed both Harry and Ron and Apparated them away. And so it began. He didn't get to say goodbye to Ginny.

At Grimmauld Place, during one of the interminable nights spent pacing, thinking, plotting how to
infiltrate the Ministry of Magic and get the Horcrux locket from Umbridge (who, apparently, had been reinstated at the Ministry following the takeover by Voldemort), the portrait of Phineas Nigellus taunted him from the wall of his old bedroom. Copies of The Daily Prophet were flung all over the room, proclaiming Snape Headmaster, declaring Harry Potter Undesirable #1, touting the importance of blood purity, issuing more dos and don't rules for education and allowing snatchers—bounty hunters—to victimize innocents. He hated Wizarding Britain, he hated what he had to do. He knew, though, that if he got to the end, he may not be so sad to die as once he thought he'd be.

The visions began at Grimmauld Place, of Voldemort wanting something, looking for something, but if he Occluded he wouldn't ever find out what it was, so instead he suffered through the visions, trying to stay a step ahead of Voldemort but feeling like he was always half a step behind.

On top of the Prophets, on a small bedside table, he'd placed his Marauder's Map. He'd been taking it out of late, looking for his friends' names on it. So many were missing. His dorm in Gryffindor tower held only Neville and Seamus now. He watched Ginny's dot move between classes, eat in the Great Hall. She spent a lot of time with Neville and Luna. Sometimes, he couldn't find any of their dots and he worried but after a while, he realized that the Room of Requirement didn't appear on the map, and they must be there, plotting, planning, at least surviving.

Though he watched his friends move about the castle on the maps, he spent far more time watching Snape's dot pace back and forth in Dumbledore's office. The dot would stop occasionally, always in the same spot and Harry, with an epiphany, realized that Snape would be standing in front of Dumbledore's portrait. On rare occasions, he'd see McGonagall's dot in there with him, but more often it was a Death Eater—Malfoy, the Carrows.

Staring at the empty frame that held Phineas Nigellus' portrait, Harry had another of those epiphany moments. Nigellus had been a Headmaster at Hogwarts. His portrait...his portrait was in Snape's office! He told Hermione and Ron, and they pried the frame off the wall and set it up on a table in the kitchen. But Phineas didn't appear.

When they finally infiltrated the Ministry of Magic, getting a horrid taste of what the Ministry was up to these days but miraculously getting the locket as well, they never made it back to Grimmauld Place. While they scrambled in the forest, healing Ron's splinched arm, setting up charms and wards to protect their location, Harry mourned the loss of that portrait. The map was rolled up in his leather pouch but the portrait was on the kitchen table.

So, when Hermione pulled the portrait out of her expandable bag that night, in the tent, Harry could have cried. He hugged her and Ron looked at him crossly then he hugged her again. Wonder of wonders, Phineas appeared within the frame, looking around the tent with curious eyes. Harry quickly dropped his jacket over the portrait and pulled out the Marauder's Map, dropping to the floor and spreading it out.

"Dinner time...he's in the Great Hall," he said. Hermione and Ron glanced at each other but left him alone, going outside to find some firewood while Harry waited...waited...waited for Snape to go back to his office, enticing Phineas to stay put if he wanted to learn more. As Snape's dot on the map started up the spiral stairs, Harry pulled the jacket off the frame.

"I need you to take a message to the Headmaster," said Harry, holding both sides of the frame and speaking directly at Nigellus. "Tell him that we got it—we got the thing we were looking for." The portrait figure nodded and moved to the edge of the frame. "Wait!" shouted Harry. "Only if he's alone...don't tell him anything unless he is alone."

He waited, checking the map for the moment Snape entered the office. The little dot stopped right after it entered the office but a moment later began to pace back and forth.
"He wants to know where you are. He says you are in mortal peril. You don't look like you're in mortal peril to me. He's quite anxious and very loud so please hurry with your answer."

Harry stared at the portrait. His throat was tight and he found it hard to speak.

"I'm fine…tell him I'm fine. We're…hiding…in a safe place."

Fifteen precious minutes of back and forth…fifteen minutes to try to convey everything he'd been feeling, doing, fearing, learning, all through a two-dimensional messenger. Fifteen minutes to listen to Phineas Nigellus delivering Snape's advice, warnings, cautions, instructions. Stay away from the Ministry, avoid Hogsmeade, do not come to Hogwarts, get out of the UK.

Weeks passed and they were getting nowhere. Moving from campsite to campsite, running out of food, stealing into Muggle villages. Struggling to stay warm, losing hope as the locket drained the light from their eyes and the future from their hearts. It was, in the end, too much for Ron. Cold, hungry, desperate, hopeless, he left them to their own hopelessness.

Christmas, so unlike the previous year he'd spent with Snape at Shell Cottage. Christmas in Godric's Hollow, the place of his birth, the place his parents were buried, the place Dumbledore's family had lived, where he'd met the young Gellert Grindelwald. Kneeling before his parents' graves in the snowy graveyard … the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Escaping Nagini…barely…breaking his wand felt like breaking his bones, his heart, letting his magic bleed out of his pores until he was empty. The doe Patronus appearing, leading him to the sword, the sword so obviously gifted to them by Snape himself. The doe was hope reborn. Destroying the locket was triumph. Stumbling into camp soaking wet, arm around Ron's shoulder, holding the sword of Gryffindor was pure, unadulterated joy. Sending Phineas to Snape that night, telling him that it was done. Snape's reply. Imagine.

From that point, the tide had turned. Voldemort was focused…focused on it. But Harry's attention was split…Horcruxes or Deathly Hollows. Horcruxes to destroy, Deathly Hollows that could make him master of death, of death that had claimed so much of what he loved.

He soldiered on. They soldiered on. Through Malfoy Manor, where he won Draco's wand, where they found Luna, where Dobby saved them. Hearing Hermione's tortured screams, keeping Ron from tearing at the bars and the stone walls, falling on his knees in that so-familiar garden with Dobby falling, Dobby dying, Dobby, his friend, wearing mismatched socks and three knitted caps. Closing his eyes, digging until his fingers were blisters, burying Dobby, Here lies Dobby, a Free Elf. Feeling Voldemort the entire time he dug, letting it go, letting Voldemort get it…the wand…Dumbledore's wand…the elder wand…the Hallow. Walking into the cottage then, through the kitchen, past Bill and the others, out to his porch, to his hammock. Lying down, falling asleep, dreaming.

A whirlwind of plans, of schemes, of deals with Goblins. Using the Imperius curse and remembering months ago, years ago, reading the Grindelwald book and thinking it's never justified…unforgivables are wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong. Finding the cup, burning his barely healed hands, riding a dragon…it's weakest point is its eyes…Hogsmeade.

He never doubted Dumbledore, no matter what he read about him in Rita Skeeter's skewed account of his life. He never doubted Snape, even when he saw him through his link with Voldemort, felt him when he suffered, felt him when he mourned. And when he met Aberforth Dumbledore at the Hog's Head, he thought he was a mix of the two great men and didn't doubt him either, despite his gruff exterior and his contention that Albus was not the saint Harry thought.
Back inside Hogwarts. He wanted to kiss the walls, the ground. He found a Neville who had come into his own, who owned the school, a Gryffindor to the core. A room full of refugees, Ginny's arms around him. He wished he had time to rest but there wasn't time for they had to find the diadem.

Luna took him to Ravenclaw and before the chaos began in earnest, he saw him.

His face was sallow, sleepless. Bags under his eyes, hair lank. He'd lost weight, he looked like death. He sparred verbally with McGonagall, asked her if he was there, but he couldn't move, couldn't voice a word, he had to live through this and get to Voldemort. Harry saw a different Snape, a defeated Snape, a Snape so embedded in a Voldemort-controlled Hogwarts that he didn't have a glimmer of light, a glimmer of hope. He didn't look like a man who was capable of imagining.

Snape disappeared like a bat on the wing and the battle began. It was horrible and dark and tense. Saving Draco...he would puzzle over that for much of his life...losing Fred...raging, giants, centaurs, boulders, werewolves, spells, explosions, the stuff of nightmares. But nothing as nightmarishly devastating as that moment in the Shrieking Shack, bending down over Snape after Voldemort had gone, after Nagini had feasted on his neck. Snape's pain his own, hardly able to move through the pain. Hermione with the dittany, Ron with the bezoar, Harry giving up and saying goodbye and crying and Snape opening his eyes, grabbing him by the collar, pulling him down, and Harry knew what he wanted, used Draco's wand to extract the memories from Snape.

"I've got the bleeding controlled, Harry," said Hermione through his stupor. "Go...to his office...the pensieve. Do what you need to do."

Ron was still holding his hands on Snape's neck, resolutely holding the flap of skin together, his hands slippery with blood. They needed something to wrap it and Hermione pulled a shirt out of her bag, wrapped it around Snape's neck without looking at it. It was Ron's Yellow Submarine shirt though and for the first time that long night, Harry smiled.

The memories were all of Snape and Dumbledore, most of Snape speaking with Dumbledore's portrait. Dumbledore's plan for Harry, his knowledge that a piece of Voldemort's soul was buried inside Harry, his deduction that Harry would have to go to his death to save the world. That it had to be Harry. It had to be the Boy Who Lived.

When he kissed the snitch, held the Resurrection Stone, walked to meet his fate, he walked with friends and family. James and Lily, his mum and dad, Sirius, his godfather, Remus, so new to death that he still walked heavily on his feet. As important to Harry in that moment was not who was there but who wasn't there. His mother leaned in before they reached the forest, whispering in his ear He's hanging on, Harry.

Standing up to face his death, dying for his friends, dying so that they could destroy the snake and have a chance of defeating Tom. Waking up in an empty, cavernous place, a place he'd been before. Not alone. Understanding. Believing. Returning. Tethered to Voldemort while Voldemort lived. Could Snape be tethered to him as well?

The snake dying. Voldemort falling. The wand sailing toward him. Catching it. Looking at it. Hermione and Ron on him, hugging him. Snape....where was Snape? He couldn't feel his pain and surely he must be in pain...if he was alive. If he had survived. Resting, enchanted sleep, semi-stasis, Draught of Peace. Sleeping on a transfigured mattress in the Shrieking Shack, hidden behind one of Hermione's protection spells.

He grabbed Hermione, the Elder Wand in his hand, left Ron to explain, ran back to the Shrieking Shack.
Snape was breathing shallowly when they reached him. Hermione could not bear the look on Harry’s face and she took the wand he proffered, carefully unwrapped Snape’s neck while Harry held his hand, traced the wound with the wand as she chanted the healing spell she had used too often this past year and the wound on Snape’s neck closed…like magic.

He faced the Aurors, the professors, the bits and pieces left of the Order of the Phoenix. He faced the Minister of Magic himself. He talked until he was hoarse with Minerva and Poppy shielding Severus, sleeping still. He slept on the floor of the infirmary that first night, not able to trust that Snape would not be carted away to Azkaban. Though there were hundreds of beds available, Ron joined him on the floor, because Harry was family, just as Fred had been. And Hermione and Ginny found them later and stayed there too. Hermione slept cuddled up with Ron, and Ginny with Harry. Poppy, exhausted, working with help from St. Mungo’s, dropped warmed blankets over them and let them be.

~*-~

Awareness came over him slowly, feeling in his fingertips, an ache in his neck that was more than a crick. One of his cheeks felt warm, as if the sunlight was striking it. He imagined he felt the ocean breeze and heard the pounding of the waves, but when he concentrated on listening, he heard the sounds of breathing, and soft feet padding across the floor. The smells were medicinal yet not unpleasant. He willed his brain to open his eyes, wondering if the connections still worked.

Poppy was standing at the foot of the bed, leaning against the iron footboard. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days but she was smiling. He moved his head to see who was sitting beside him.

"Careful, Headmaster," said Minerva from her chair at his side. "Take it slowly. You've been a bit under the weather the last few days."

"Voldemort?" he rasped out, in barely more than a whisper.

"Dead," said Minerva. "Right in the middle of the Great Hall."

"Good," he said, very softly. The two words should not have exhausted him so much. He closed his eyes, but not before noticing a small clock on his bedside table. The hand pointed to "Great Hall."

"You've received an Order of Merlin, First Class," persisted Minerva. "They've decided not to have special ceremonies what with the state things are in. Kingsley delivered it yesterday. Harry accepted it for you. Harry insisted on a full pardon as well, which Kingsley granted on the spot. That boy can be persistent."

Snape opened his eyes and stared at her.

Minerva laughed. "Kingsley is the new Minister of Magic, Severus. And Harry went down, at our insistence, to get some lunch a little while ago. He'll be back before you know it—he's hardly left your side this past week."

There were things he wanted to know, information he should have before Harry arrived.

"How many…dead?" he asked.

"All told...far too many," sighed Minerva. "Almost a hundred who fought on our side, and that's without the centaurs and house elves. It was not pretty, Severus. But it is over—truly, irrevocably and completely over."

"Harry's friends?" he asked, his eyes, more focused now, sliding from bed to bed in the infirmary.
"Fred Weasley," said Minerva. "Both Remus and Nymphadora. He's taken those very hard. They
made him godfather to the baby, and Andromeda brought him here yesterday, to the funerals, you
see…"

Her voice fell off.

"They buried the dead…here?" He would have liked to have been buried at Hogwarts, by the lake,
or at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"Many of them, yes," answered Poppy, still standing at the foot of his bed. "And fortunately you
were not among them, Headmaster. Ahh, there he is."

Minerva turned toward the doors of the Hospital Wing and waved.

The Harry Potter who approached was not the boy who had watched him kill Dumbledore a year
before.

Minerva slid out of her chair and went to stand by Poppy at the foot of the bed. Harry kept his eyes
on Snape's as he neared. His hair was long, approaching a proper wizarding length. The shadow on
his face was no longer that of a boy just learning his first shaving charm. His arms and hands showed
signs of recent burns, poorly healed. The boy sat on Minerva's chair, staring at Snape, not speaking.
He reached out a hand toward Snape's face, brushing loose hair off his face.

"How…how did you do it? In the end?" said Snape.

"Expelliarmus," said Harry. "With the elder wand. Long story—not important now." Snape watched
tears leak out the corner of Harry's eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand.

"Bill and Fleur have bought a cottage near the Burrow," Harry said. "So we're going back to Shell
Cottage—as soon as Poppy says you can leave."

When had he started calling the teachers by their first names? When had he started making decisions
for him? When had he grown up? Become a man?

"You've forgotten the shaving charm?" he asked, trying to lift a heavy arm off the bed, pointing
toward Harry's face.

"Funny you should say that," said Harry, rubbing a hand against his extremely stubbly chin.
"Because I've been using it on you every day for the last week. As for me, I'm growing a beard."

"For the summer," said Snape, his voice now no more than a whisper. "You'll have to shave it when
you come back in August for the new school year."

Harry stared at Snape. "Back?"

"Last time I looked, someone hadn't showed up for his last year of school," said Snape. Harry had to
lean in to hear him.

"I'll make you a deal," said Harry softly as Snape closed his eyes, exhausted. "I'll come back…if you
will."

Many Years Later…

From his place behind the podium in the front of the Great Hall, Headmaster Severus Snape raised
one hand and the chattering of students, recently reunited after a summer break, gradually stopped.
Unlike Albus Dumbledore, his predecessor, he was not given to utter oddities or make grandiose speeches about unity and friendship. He'd long-ago abolished the tradition of singing the Hogwarts Alma Mater to different tunes. He'd have abolished the song altogether if singing it hadn't been a dictate in the School Constitution—specifically, singing it at least once per academic year in a venue which included all the teachers and students together.

He was nearly sixty years old now, and his hair had a few white strands amid the midnight black. It was nearly as long as Albus' had been, though he kept his beard in a neat goatee instead of growing it to his feet and throwing it over his shoulder as Albus had.

He looked out at the sea of faces before him, spotting a redhead sitting, inevitably, at the Gryffindor table with her brothers. Lily Luna had promised him she'd go to Slytherin yet the hat obviously could not look past her Potter and Weasley genes and see the truly conniving child she could be. Still, he had to admit, she was brave. Braver than her brothers, even.

Hugo sat amid the Ravenclaws. Both of Hermione and Ron's children had inherited their mother's sharp intelligence and their father's ability to think four steps ahead. He had to admit the combined genetics were a masterful mix in their progeny.

Just before the sorting, Ginny Potter had stepped inside the room, standing against the wall at the back of the hall. He appreciated that she had come today, come to give her husband support as he began his career—long, Snape hoped—of Defense Master at Hogwarts. Ginny had looked surprised herself when Lily went to Gryffindor.

A few introductory comments. The usual warnings. A new list of banned products. Introductions.

"This year, joining us after a long and distinguished career in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, our new Defense Master, Professor Harry Potter. Please do try not to fawn or drool over him too much—the drool makes slippery puddles that can be quite dangerous near stairs."

Impossibly, they'd managed to keep it totally quiet. His own children didn't even know. He'd been sitting near the end of the Head Table and had managed to keep his head down for most of the meal and the preliminaries.

Harry stood, then, and bowed to the students. James and Albus sat with mouths open while Lily jumped up and down and the rest of the students cheered and stood and tried to get a good look at him.

"Professor Potter is not a sculpture on display for your enjoyment," said the Headmaster. "I am sure you will soon grow tired of seeing him every day in class."

Snickers from some of the students but most greeted him warmly when they filed out past the lined up faculty, a tradition Snape had started the year after the final battle, and many thanked him for what he had done, twenty years ago, in this very room.

When all were gone, when James, Al an Lily had been told about the new cottage in Hogsmeade and Ginny had flooed back to settle in for the night, Snape took Harry by the elbow.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Harry nodded and they walked together to the center of the hall where the Ministry, despite the objections of both Snape and Harry, had erected a monument. Fortunately, their objections had at least kept the monument to a modest size and style.

"On this spot, Harry James Potter defeated Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort." It was followed by the
The two men stared at the plaque another moment.

"Come on, Harry. A quick game of chess before you floo back to your lovely wife and empty home. Let's see, it's eight thirty…you should be home by nine…"

Harry snorted. He could no longer feel the Headmaster's pain, or his passion—that connection had ended twenty years ago on this very spot. But Severus was family now, and that connection would never end.

Harry looked down at the plaque once more. A simple phrase, a phrase suggested by Severus while he'd recuperated at Shell Cottage, was inscribed at the bottom of the stone.

"And the world will live as one."

Fin

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