

Whistling in the Dark

by Melenka

Years after the war, Harry's attempts to withdraw are foiled by a visit, a different sort of quest, and the interference of well-meaning people.

Waking Up

Chapter 1 of 8

Years after the war, Harry's attempts to withdraw are foiled by a visit, a different sort of quest, and the interference of well-meaning people.

In order for the relentless banging on the door to have woken Harry, he would have had to have been asleep, which he was not. These days, the best he could manage was to skirt the edge between sleeping and waking. If he'd been a normal man, he would have claimed insomnia and perhaps sought a prescription for some drug that would make him sleep and maybe fly his broom whilst sleeping, which might or might not be worth the good story it would make if he survived. Conversely, he could have subjected himself to chocolate, which had lost its pleasure, or pumpkin juice, which had never had any, or any number of other tinctures combined with another stay at St. Mungo's, but he still would not have been able to sleep, because there was, to his knowledge, no cure for dreams. His rambling train of thought refused to pull up at any particular station, either to take on or dislodge notions, but rather shuffled them from car to car until they ended up at the beginning and started the cycle all over again. If he'd been an ordinary man, he would not have noticed, but he was not then nor ever would be considered anything approaching normal.

"Hang on!" He did not add 'you bloody lout,' even though he was *almost* certain the wielder of the fist attempting to smash down his door was someone who fit the description perfectly.

It was the almost that stopped him. His night terrors had lost him one flat, before he'd figured out how to avoid sleeping too much or too deeply. He probably should not have kept his wand beneath his pillow at night, but as he continued the tradition, that was a lesson intentionally unlearned. The old place had needed a good remodel anyway, but the owner had probably not envisioned it occurring in such a spectacular manner.

As for his current abode, he did not want to accidentally curse at his landlady, even if it wouldn't be near what she'd been called when she was younger and working with disenfranchised youth her term, not Harry's because you never knew what would set a person off. Besides, he might accidentally curse her with something magical, his skills not being at their best, and that would definitely result in having to find other accommodation. He swung open the door and stepped out of the way.

"About time," grumbled Dudley. He tossed his duffel against the wall, looked around, and pronounced the apartment a veritable dump, only without using the word veritable, because he was, after all, Dudley.

"You're welcome to walk right back out," Harry said without malice.

"What, and miss catching up with my favorite cousin?" Dudley punched Harry's arm lightly.

"Favorite? I'm the only one who'll talk to you." Harry closed the door.

"Too true, but you're still my favorite. The others are barely blood relations anyway."

Harry sighed. "I didn't agree to have you come to stay because I'm obligated by blood. Any debt required by family connection was discharged a long time ago, in spades."

Dudley had the grace to blush. "I know." He clenched his fist and released it, more discomfited than aggressive.

"Let it go, Dudley. We've said our thanks and begged our forgiveness enough for a lifetime. Let's have some breakfast and figure out what to do with you." He walked down the narrow hall.

"I can take care of myself," Dudley protested.

"Clearly," Harry called over his shoulder. He winced at sounding more like Professor Snape than would ever be comfortable. Sometimes, he wondered if his old teacher's ghost didn't hang about to encourage his cynicism and revel in his loneliness. It had always been easier to blame Snape than take responsibility for his own flaws, though Harry could no longer do so without suffering remorse. Since that was more angst than he could bear, even from himself, Harry shook off the memories and put on the kettle.

"Sit down like you expect to be served, and I'll have you out of my place in an instant." Harry didn't raise his voice. He didn't have to. Not with Dudley or anyone else. He'd asked Hermione about it, before she'd hared off on her latest mission to mend the social fabric by tearing it asunder. She'd said there was something about the way he spoke now, and the look in his eye, that made people feel it best to do as he said. Harry couldn't tell the difference. He sounded just the same to himself, and he made it a habit not to spend time looking in mirrors. Not for a long time now.

The chair creaked as Dudley rose. "What do you need?"

"Bangers in the meat drawer, a couple of eggs, and that half loaf of good bread. You probably didn't eat on the train, so tea and toast isn't likely to do anything but elevate your mood from wretched to irritable."

"I did too eat," Dudley muttered. "But I won't argue with a proper breakfast."

"Never did," Harry returned.

"You can't fault my weight now. Lost most of it in Majorca. Terrible place. The rest went during my rugby days." Leave it to Dudley to despise one of the premier vacation destinations in the world. Or perhaps the fact that his parents remained there caused his distaste for the beautiful island.

Harry ignored the inner workings of their family for a safer topic. "You do look fit. How's the leg these days?"

"Gimpy." Dudley shrugged. "It will do."

"It could be fixed," Harry offered.

"Doctors said it can't."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"No matter. The leg holds well enough. "

Harry pushed the bread across the counter, hoping his cousin would get the hint. He tried not to look surprised when Dudley actually dropped the slices in the toaster.

"It's not that I'm afraid of magic," Dudley said. "Well, not entirely. I just don't want it pointed at me, if you know what I mean. I'd rather limp."

Harry nodded. He'd had enough magic directed at him to understand the reluctance to face more, and he'd been armed against it more often than not. Whether he'd known what to do with his wand was another story. Dudley had never been able to come to his own defense against magic, which must have been terrifying. They'd both had miserable childhoods, even if Dudley came to recognize it late.

The pop of hot grease brought Harry's attention back to breakfast. "Get some plates, you slug."

"I made the toast!" Dudley protested. He got the plates anyway. "How come you cook like normal if you could just wave your wand and have a perfect meal?"

"It doesn't really work like that." Harry cracked eggs into the pan. "Not for me. Besides, I learned to cook making you breakfast, so the least you could do is appreciate my skill."

"Hope you're better at it than you used to be," Dudley teased.

"Could hardly be worse, could I? You'll eat it either way."

"Always," Dudley agreed.

They sat at the small table and ate in silence, mostly because they'd never been much on polite conversation when there was food to be had. Harry knew Dudley wanted more than a place to sleep while his house was renovated, but he could wait to find out what. For reasons that defied their mutual upbringing, Harry found his cousin's presence a comfort. They'd discussed the war once, and Dudley had been impressed by the fact that Harry was, technically, a murderer, though there was a chance that it might have been a lesser charge in a normal British court, in light of how it was motivated both by self-preservation and saving the world and all Dudley's words, not Harry's but they had not talked about it since, for which Harry was profoundly grateful.

"So, what happened to that pretty girl you were dating?" Dudley asked. "The ginger with a mean glare."

Harry closed his eyes, trying to find a way to explain that would not make him look like a total loser, then gave it up for a lost cause. "She ran off with one of my best friends."

Dudley frowned. "Which one?"

Harry took a deep breath and released it. There was nothing for it but the truth. "Luna."

"She never did!"

"Truly. I believe they're on holiday in Greece at the moment. They're very much in love."

To his credit, Dudley tried very hard to put on a sympathetic expression. It looked more like a bad case of constipation and gas. Twenty-seven seconds later there was a clock behind his head, and it was very precise Dudley burst out laughing.

Harry threw fuel on the fire. "Luna's last name is Lovegood, so with any luck, she's living up to it."

Dudley laughed until he turned bright red, the way Uncle Vernon used to when he was angry, and came very close to breaking the chair as he tilted back and was dumped onto the floor. He continued to guffaw, coughing intermittently, until Harry kicked him.

"Wanker," Harry said, and walked out.

He wasn't really upset, but Dudley need not know that. Ginny had made a good choice. She and Luna sent him postcards that read "wish you were here," and he knew they

meant it. They'd both done yeoman's service putting him back together after the war. No wonder they'd grown close enough to figure out their feelings for each other. Harry smiled. His recovery had resulted in one good thing. Well, besides his no longer being completely insane, but that was more a matter of opinion than established fact.

For itchyfoot, who gives a very fine prompt, indeed.

Reaching Out

Chapter 2 of 8

Harry discovers the reason for Dudley's visit, and comes face to fireplace with some of his fears.

Harry sat perfectly still, listening to Dudley do dishes, further proof that his cousin had changed whether by necessity or choice hardly mattered and wondered what it would be like to have someone around for breakfast on a regular basis. He couldn't allow anyone live with him, not if he cared for them, and if he didn't care, it would be unlikely he'd ask someone to share his space, much less his life, but it might be nice to have someone to stop by once in a while. Someone who didn't treat him like he was fragile, didn't notice how he held himself perfectly still sometimes, because it was better than reacting to the normal sounds of the world as if they were klaxons of danger, as if a young man's high laugh was not a scream, a woman's calling out to a neighbor not the beginning of a curse that would render him mute and twisted on the floor. No, he could not chance revealing how broken he remained, not even to people who had watched him break. The wonderful thing about Dudley was that he was just self-absorbed enough to not notice.

"You don't have a telly?" Dudley was clearly scandalized.

"Never got used to it." The images moved too fast, even with the sound down; it was too loud, too explosive, or sometimes too dull. He liked the cookery shows, but they were all available on his computer, so he didn't bother with a television. He had almost convinced himself that his aversion to television had nothing at all to do with the time he'd been taken to a Muggle emergency room and subjected to six hours of mindless blather from a screen over which he'd had no control. He'd never left home without his wand after that. Nor, for that matter, had he allowed himself to be taken anywhere against his wishes. Luckily, the worst of the flashbacks had stopped, and he hadn't collapsed in the street in months. He still avoided stores, favoring open-air markets. The florescent light bore too close a resemblance to the sickly glow of malevolent spells.

"So, you've no job, no telly, no friends to speak of, and you've left the hocus-pocus world behind. What do you do with yourself?" Leave it to Dudley to cut straight to it.

"Not much," Harry admitted. "I read a lot." *And frequent abandoned areas where I can blow holes in piles of rubbish to make sure my spells still work, which they sometimes do, but sometimes not.*

"Does it satisfy, then? Blowing up the rubbish?"

Harry blanched. Since Dudley barely knew his own mind, it was a sure bet he could not read Harry's, which meant he had spoken the last bit aloud.

Strangely, Dudley seemed unbothered by Harry's inadvertent admission.

"Not really, no. Can't think of another way to keep in practice with that particular skill set, though."

"That's reassuring," Dudley said drily. The fact that Dudley could say anything drily was new. "Care to try something a little less destructive then? I mean, if you feel the need to stay in practice, why not put the wand waving to good use?"

Harry stared at his cousin as if he'd grown another head, which, all things considered, was not entirely out of the question, however unlikely.

"You look like someone's hit you in the face with a hammer." Dudley chuckled.

"You don't like magic." *That was what he'd said, not an hour before, wasn't it?*

"Not what I said at all," Dudley corrected, though Harry was sure he hadn't spoken aloud that time. "I don't like spells pointed at **me**. I could see it being very useful for other things. A lot of other things, truth to tell, though I 'spect you wouldn't approve of most of them."

"Using magic for criminal activity carries a stiff penalty," Harry intoned with exactly the sort of dullness he imagined he would have developed as a Ministry drone.

"Pfft. I was thinking more along the lines of making a bloke more handsome, so he could pick up a bird or two in a pub."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Having problems with that, are you?"

"Not so much as you, it seems." Ever the tactful one, Dudley.

"So, what is it you want me to do that you don't think I'd want to do for you?"

"Make my house safe."

"Little Whinging isn't exactly the hub of crime," Harry pointed out. "But if you feel unsafe, get a security system installed."

Dudley rolled his eyes. "I'm supposed to be the slow one, yeah? I want you to make it so your lot can't sneak up on me. If I have fair warning, I could either escape or fight back with normal weapons."

"Like what?"

"I've a shotgun now, for sports shooting. I could protect myself, if I had to."

Harry sighed. "The only one of my lot, as you call them, who is likely to wish harm on you is me, and we're over that."

"You're telling me that you have no more enemies, no one who wants to get the best of you? Because if there's even one person out there with a grudge, they might remember where it was you grew up. Maybe they'll think we're close enough that you'd rescue me if they threatened my life."

"We are," Harry said. "I would."

"And there's me, sitting in that house, ripe for the picking. Again."

"You might think about selling the house," Harry offered.

"Think about it? **Think** about it?" Dudley shrieked. "We've tried for going on five years! Dad's left it to me to deal with, but no one will touch it. There's rumors, right? Things went on in that place, and everyone knows it. The only way to salvage the house is to move back in and be absolutely normal for a few years, until what people remember is that a big bloke lives there and forgets to trim up his yard sometimes. Then, maybe, I can find some young family to buy it, but even then, I'd worry if they didn't have just a little bit of protection at least until your lot figures out that no one related to you lives there anymore."

Harry blinked several times. Not once in his life had Dudley ever thought a problem all the way through, much less considered the welfare of someone he didn't even know. Or maybe Harry hadn't been around for that particular transition to maturity. Either way, it came as a revelation.

"I'm not that good at charms and wards," Harry confessed. "Life pointed me in the direction of battle skills, you know?"

Dudley nodded. "But you know someone. You must know someone. Maybe call in one of those favors for knocking off that nutter who was trying to take over. People must feel they owe you for that."

"I'm sure there are some who do, but if they offered, I wasn't paying attention." Couldn't pay attention was more like it, but he didn't need to share that.

"Well, start. Call up someone who still likes you and ask around, or whatever it is you do in place of a telephone tree."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Telephone tree? Like what parents do to organize school events?" He left out the word Muggle, since Dudley had always thought it insulting.

"Yeah." Dudley's voice held a note of defensiveness.

"How long has it been since someone did that, what with computers and such?"

"Still happens," Dudley murmured. "We had one when I coached the kids' rugby team a couple years back. Everyone has a mobile now. Not everyone likes computers."

"You coached children?"

"Quit gaping at me like I'm some zoo exhibit. I can do good things if I want to." The petulant statement sounded so much like the younger Dudley that Harry relented.

"Might want to find somewhere else to be for a bit," Harry suggested. "The way I network is more complex than a phone tree. There's glowing involved." He teased to hide his real reason for wanting Dudley gone. He was entirely unsure how well he would be received by anyone he cared to contact.

Dudley picked up his bag and walked up the stairs. A few minutes later, Harry heard the shower start. He took a deep breath before throwing the Floo powder into the fireplace. It had never worked for a fire, and he hadn't tried to use it to Floo since first assuring himself it was, in fact, connected to the network. He didn't step inside, again because he was unsure of his reception, even in a place he'd called home. No one stepped through, because Harry would have killed them, a calmly stated fact that had led the Ministry to make his fireplace a one-way only connection.

"Harry? Is that really you?" Molly Weasley sounded strained. The cry of a child further off provided the reason.

"Yes, it's me. Thank you for answering, Mrs. Weasley."

"Molly, dear, and do get on with what you want. Little Louis has been in a snit since Fleur left him with me an hour ago, and I'm afraid he's going to set something on fire again."

"Sorry to bother you. I was wondering if you knew a way I could contact Tonks and whether or not that might turn out okay for me."

"She has one of those Muggle devices. Surely you knew that."

"I lost her number." He'd lost the entire mobile in the rubble of his last apartment. He thought it best not to mention that disaster.

"And her Floo address?"

"She's moved since the last time I looked her up. Even if I could connect, I can't help but wonder if perhaps she's had enough of me ruining her life. After Remus..." He didn't know how to phrase the next bit without giving away secrets not entirely his own.

"Goodness! Do you still blame yourself for what happened in the war?"

Her simple question sent a jolt through him. He stumbled back as the images cascaded through his mind like a flip-book of the descent into hell. It took several moments for him to regulate his breathing enough to answer her with a semblance of calm.

"Some of it was my doing." If he hadn't hesitated, hadn't taken so long to figure out what they were supposed to be looking for, hadn't taken a vacation in his head in the middle of battle... then, maybe, there would have been fewer graves.

"Thinking you could have saved everyone is a bit narcissistic." Coming from Molly, that was a statement of fact, not an admonishment. "You really should get over that, dear."

Harry smiled, despite himself. "I'll be sure to work on that."

"Don't worry about Tonks. Like everyone else, she credits you with saving those who lived."

"That was Neville's doing, really," Harry muttered.

"In part," Molly agreed, "but he's a devil at avoiding the spotlight, and so have you become. The fervor has died down now, which is not to say anyone will ever forget, but the world is moving on. You should let it."

Harry had nothing to say to that.

"I'll contact Tonks for you. If she wants to talk, she'll get in touch herself. Give her a day or so. I understand Teddy is being particularly difficult of late, which you would know if you ever visited the boy. But then I suppose you wouldn't need me to act as intermediary." The wailing in the background increased. "I must run, dear. Do stop by for tea soon. It's been too long." And with that she was gone.

Harry stepped back until he was against the wall. He let out a long breath and slid to the floor. Little by little, his muscles uncramped. Several more deep breaths and he was able to move again. The whole process aggravated him. If only he could "get over it" as Molly suggested. He still tensed up when he had to talk to someone for more than a few moments. Dudley did not count, partly because he was family, and partly because he was not a wizard and had only a vague notion of what that last battle had been like. Still, his cousin was right about one thing; the end of the war did not mean peace.

Seeing Tonks would definitely not be peaceful, but he needed her. Again. He wondered what price he would pay for her help.

"So?" Dudley's damp hair stuck out in multiple directions, something it could only do when wet.

Harry looked up. "I put the word out. Someone should respond inside a couple of days."

"That long?"

"People have busy lives." Harry wondered what that would be like.

Then he remembered.

For itchyfoot, who gives a very fine prompt, indeed.

Day in, Day Out

Chapter 3 of 8

Tonks gets a message, and sends one back.

Tonks had had just about enough, and said so.

Teddy feigned innocence regarding the mess around him. "Mummy, your hair's gone green again."

"Does that when I get angry."

He looked at her for a moment, then promptly turned into a Cairn terrier the color of dishwater well, part of him did - and slunk away, tail and ears drooping.

"Stay!" Tonks shouted, as she did every time he attempted to get out of trouble by showing her his hangdog look. She couldn't let him get away with it, even though his Metamorphic abilities had yet to stop being amusing. She set her face in what she hoped was a stern look. "Change back. That's not how we deal with problems around here."

He morphed back into a child, one covered with the evidence of his crime. "You turn us into ferrets when you want people to think we aren't home," he said.

"That's different."

"How?"

Tonks took a deep breath. "Because I'm your mother, so when you've clearly broken the rules, you can't expect to get away with it by becoming something else. Underneath it all, you're still my child, and I still know what you've done."

"I didn't mean to," he said forlornly.

Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline and would have kept going if she hadn't got hold of her magic in time. "Didn't mean to? You dragged the stool half across the kitchen and used it to climb onto the counter. You then used the cabinet shelves to hoist yourself up to the top of the icebox, whereupon you ate an entire plate of cookies. Which part of that did you not mean?"

"The part where you caught me trying to get down again."

*I will not laugh. I will **not**.* She turned her back on her only child.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "But they were very good."

"Get those clothes off. You need a tub." She still could not look at him. He was crumbs from the tip of his mussed hair to the bottoms of his dirty little feet, with smears of chocolate like war paint across his cheeks, his arms, his forehead. She'd taken a picture before he realized he'd been caught in the act.

Remus would have loved the abandon with which their child devoured the treats, though he would likely have handled the aftermath more sternly. A familiar pain lanced through her at the thought of her late husband, lingering only long enough to steal one breath, perhaps two. That was an improvement over having to run into the bedroom and scream into her pillow so she didn't scare the baby.

"Muuuuuum!" Teddy's voice echoed down the hall.

Not a baby any longer is he? She poked her head into the bathroom and flicked her wand to start the tub running. A bottle of bubble bath rose up and tipped until a thin stream met with the water. Teddy stayed in longer if he had mounds of bubbles, just like any child.

"At least one of us is normal," she murmured, as her naked son careened down the corridor.

"Bubbles!" came his war cry as he flung himself into the tub. He popped up with fish scales covering his face.

"Almost normal," she amended.

She pulled a stool into the corner, just out of splash range, and leaned her head back, one eye on the bits of her son she could see. Teddy was the reason she wasn't dead, though they'd thought her so. Seeing Remus cold and still, she'd almost let go and joined him. It would have been so easy, so peaceful. Narcissa screaming for Draco had brought her back, though she'd never tell her aunt that. Lying on the ground, wounded, soul-blasted, she had not thought of her son until a mother's cry reminded her of who else she was. The guilt of that was wrapped up firmly and kept in a box to be dealt with sometime in the future.

"What's done is done," she said softly.

"I don't want to be done!" wailed Teddy, whose hearing was as sharp as his sense of smell. Some things, he had inherited from his father, though no other indication of lycanthropy had surfaced.

Yet. She took a calming breath and let it out, just as she'd been taught. If Teddy ended up being a werewolf, so be it. She'd certainly not love him less, though she might have to consider reinforcing the shed.

"If you wash up now, I'll let you play until the bubbles are flat." She left out the bit about how she'd slowly dissolve them, so he'd end up going to bed at the usual time. Eventually, he would figure it out, but by then he'd be old enough to bathe without supervision anyway.

By the time she'd finished tucking him in, reading a story, singing a song, turning into a bird, a hamster, a cat, and back into his mother albeit with a dragon snout and rather impressive wings and insisting that he go to sleep without another word, she was ready for bed herself. A ping on her mobile made her sigh, but she checked it anyway.

Floo my mum. It was from Ron, whose number she recognized from a series of drunk texts a few weeks back. None since then, though he apologized every time he saw her in person. She'd taken to avoiding the elevators at the Ministry. If he was making the enormous step of sending a text, she might as well find out why. Only those who were tasked with keeping an eye on Harry were allowed by the Ministry to have the full range of Muggle technology, though plenty of others used the devices on the sly. They were half a step away from being magic, but it was an important half-step.

Tonks preferred talking by Floo, which was good, as Molly Weasley had forbidden Muggle artifacts being brought into her house.

"Oh, Tonks, thank goodness you got my message! May I come through?" As usual, Molly did not wait for an answer. "It's about Harry. He's asking for help."

"What sort of help?" Tonks said with trepidation.

"Yours," Molly said, as if that made it all clear.

"No offense, but why did he send you to ask?"

"None taken. I think he's afraid you'll refuse him."

"And so I might, but if he wants an answer from me, then he should ask me, not you."

Molly sighed. "He's not himself, you know."

Everyone knew. Harry's complete breakdown and subsequent recovery had been watched with fascination by the entire wizarding world. His decision to withdraw for a while was understandable. His failure to return was another matter entirely.

"I suspect he's exactly himself, Molly. He's just not who everyone wants him to be."

Molly gave her a sad smile. "You always did know how to read him. No wonder it's you he wants to see."

"It's because of our time in St. Mungo's." *And after.* There were some things the world had not witnessed.

"It's because he trusts you."

"He has a funny way of showing it. We've all had it rough, some worse than others, but everyone continues to treat him like he's more special than any other person who lived through the war." That was as good a reason as any to be angry at him, even if it wasn't her primary reason.

"Well, he is special, isn't he?"

"Yes, fine," Tonks conceded. "But does that mean we should allow him to turn into the boy who refuses to live? He's set up in his Muggle hideaway where he doesn't have to see the world he fought to preserve, and everyone tiptoes around him like he's already shattered and they're afraid to step on the pieces. Even the Ministry, because it's easier to pretend he's taking a little break than to admit he doesn't cut a very heroic figure right now. Here's the truth of it; he is broken and no amount of wrapping him in cotton wool will fix that."

Molly blinked, opened and closed her mouth, and said nothing.

"You can all do as you please, but I won't put up with him acting like he's the only person who's been damaged. So, if the amazing Harry Potter wants to ask me a favor, he should find the stones to do so or go back to sulking in the bloody corner."

"Shall I tell him exactly that?" Molly's mouth twitched as she obviously fought a smile.

Tonks sighed. "If you'd like."

"You have good reason to be upset with Harry," Molly said.

"Several. He hasn't contacted me in a very long time, and when he does, it's because he needs something. The least he can do is ring me up himself." Her hair turned crimson. "The absolute, very least. So yeah, feel free to tell him I think he's a coward and a selfish git, but that's no reason not to call if he needs help."

"I think perhaps I'll send him an owl instead." Molly's missives were the only owls Harry regularly accepted, a fact which had irked the Ministry to no end.

"Thanks for running interference, Molly, and I apologize for ranting at you."

"Not to worry, dear. I'll be sending the Minister a bill for services rendered." She patted Tonks on the arm, then went back through the Floo.

"That'll be Hermione's influence," Tonks said to the empty room. Events all over the world, both worlds, really, had Hermione's signature, and though no one could find hard proof that the activist witch was behind the recent spate of uprisings, she made no secret of her campaign for equal pay for witches.

"All that rabble-rousing, and **she** makes time to pay us a visit." Tonks continued to mutter to herself as she straightened the kitchen. Then she set about making cookies for the second time that day. Try as she might, she could not convince herself that the flush she felt at the idea of seeing Harry again was due solely to the warmth of the oven. Unfortunately, her stomach was tied in knots, thus ensuring there would be another plate of cookies for Teddy to steal in the morning.

It was comforting to know exactly what would happen in at least one area of her life.

For itchyfoot, who has waited patiently for Tonks to appear.:)

The First Step

Chapter 4 of 8

Harry steels himself for the confrontation with Tonks and is not disappointed.

It took six false starts over three days before Harry could bring himself to contact Tonks directly. He might have given up if not for Dudley threatening to move in permanently. Dudley snored almost as loudly as Uncle Vernon had. Harry was beginning to dread nightfall, especially as he had not yet discovered a way to sleep without dreaming. Perhaps Dudley's nocturnal snorfling was the cure Harry had been seeking. Now, all he had to do was figure out a way to live without any sleep at all.

"Or quit griping about something that could be cured with the right assortment of pills," Dudley said around his morning toast.

"I was doing it again, wasn't I?" Apparently, Harry frequently talked out loud without hearing himself.

Dudley nodded.

"Bugger." He wondered what could be done to fix his inadvertent speaking, then decided he had more pressing concerns.

Dudley wisely returned to catching up on sports scores on the computer.

Harry went in search of his mobile, then decided he might as well contact Tonks the proper way. Or one of them. He wouldn't keep an owl again and only tolerated the ones Molly sent because ignoring them had resulted in her sending people to check on him. Since he was more than a little touchy about being surprised, that had not worked out well for anyone. He suspected he'd get a similar welcome from Tonks, which was why he'd been stalling.

"Time to swallow my pride and face the firing squad." He'd been slightly less afraid of Voldemort, though that might be the ensuing years dulling his memories. He took a calming breath, tossed the powder into the fireplace, and identified Tonks' address.

"Greeeeen!" The squeal of pure delight was followed by a fit of giggles.

"Teddy? It's Uncle Harry. Could you find your mum?"

"She's not a ferret," Teddy said solemnly. "But she might be for you."

Harry decided to let that cryptic statement go. "Thanks for telling me. Is she nearby?"

"What's a cow-git?" the boy asked.

"Um, I don't know." If he'd studied whatever it was, he had no memory of it.

"You have to know!" Teddy insisted.

"Why?"

"Cuz mum says you are one, so you must know what you are."

"I'm a man, Teddy. And a wizard. Sometimes." He muttered the last bit.

"I **knew** that." Only children could get away with such world weariness and disdain at obvious statements. Well, children and the late Professor Snape.

"Could you get your mum?" Harry repeated, hoping it would work.

"Come play with me," Teddy demanded.

"I'd like to, but I need to talk to your mum right now."

"No you don't."

"I don't?" Harry pinched the bridge of his nose against the oncoming headache.

"No."

Harry took a deep breath and asked the next question. "Why don't I need to talk with her?"

"Because he never comes around, so why should I welcome him just because he needs something?" Teddy mimicked his mother's voice a little too well.

"Could you maybe find your mum?"

"I didn't **lose** her," Teddy huffed.

I did. Harry swallowed the words before they could come out of his mouth.

"She's in the loo," Teddy said in what was surely meant to be a whisper. That changed quickly as the boy took an audible breath and yelled, "Muuuuuum! The daft bugger is at the Floo!"

Harry ground his teeth. He deserved all that and more, but not from the mouth of a five-year-old.

"Teddy!" Tonks called out. "What have I told you about saying such things?"

"That I shouldn't do it in front of strangers?" The boy's voice faded away.

"Hello, Tonks," Harry said softly.

Silent green flames were the only response.

He tried again. "I hear I'm a cow-git. Is there a uniform for that?"

"I expect what you have on will do."

"Could I come through?" The words were barely out of his mouth before she answered.

"No."

"Then would you come to me? I could open the connection."

"No." The word was simple, clean, no malice in it, no heat.

"Okay." He took several calming breaths. "I am very sorry for not having been in touch lately. I could list the reasons, but I'm guessing it wouldn't improve my standing with you."

"Not much."

"I don't know what to do or say to make this easier."

"You want this to be easy?" There was the heat. "You don't get it, do you? **This** is never going to be easy, because I don't have that luxury."

"And you think I do?" Harry fought to keep his tone even but failed.

"Oh, I know it. You don't bother to visit for months, and I'm left to wonder what I've said or done to make you retreat into your shell. I could handle that, especially coming from you. But I had to find a way to convince Teddy that he didn't lose your love. I told him you were busy doing important things, and would come when you could. You were off on an adventure somewhere exotic. You would return some day. Only you didn't."

"What an exciting life I must have been living." He could feel his anger, like a blade sliding along muscle and bone, but from the inside. "So much more exciting than fighting the monsters that appear every time I close my eyes for more than a second. I will have to come up with good stories to tell him, since you felt the need to lie."

"What was I supposed to say? 'Uncle Harry won't get the help he needs, so you're out of luck?' He's a child, Harry, and you're his godfather. I understand that you're going through hard times. I let it go, until you missed his birthday. You try explaining to a little boy why the man he knows better than any other doesn't think enough of him to show up for cake."

"I'm not safe!" Harry's bellow bowed the green flame.

"Who the hell is?" Tonks countered. "You act like you're the only one who's out of control, the only one who hurts. The one **chosen** to embody all our suffering. I know what you sacrificed, Harry. I know what was asked of you. I'll even grant you the title of savior of the world. That doesn't let you off the hook for failing the people in your life."

"Enough." He stepped into his fireplace and out of hers.

Tonks glared at him. "Did you not understand when I said no?"

Words failed him.

"What it meant was that I did not want you to be here at this particular moment." Her patient tone did not cover the hostility of her body language—arms crossed, feet set to fight, tension running through every inch of her. "So, why did you barge in on me?"

Harry tried very hard to make his brain function properly. Unfortunately, it was much too busy calculating exactly how long the towel—which gapped at her thigh in a very enticing way—could remain wrapped around her if she shifted like that again. "Um..."

"Well said." She did not shrug her shoulders, much to Harry's disappointment. A good shrugging would have done wonders for the conversation.

"Eyes up here," she demanded.

He felt the blush creep up his cheeks, as if he were still a boy, which was exactly how he felt. He lifted his gaze to her face. "Right. Sorry."

"Not really," she said.

He grinned at her. "No, not really."

"What you need is a good hexing." It was an empty threat.

He let his gaze travel the length of her. "Where are you keeping your wand?"

She flexed her fingers and the slender piece of wood flew to her. She did not point it at him. "Where do you keep yours these days?"

He opened his hands. "Haven't had much occasion to use it."

"I'd put money on it being in your back pocket," she said.

"You'd win," he conceded.

Her hair turned the color of ripe mangos, the fleshy bits, not the skin. He suspected she'd work herself back to the particular shade of green that indicated how displeased she was with him, but for the moment, he admired the rich, peachy-orange and the way her damp hair curled on her neck. A drop of water slid down her collar bone. He curled his fingers into his palm until the nails bit tender flesh, as he fought the urge to follow that droplet over her skin.

"See something you like?" she purred.

"Yes." Lying would be pointless.

"Then you shouldn't have walked away from it." She turned her back and moved to the door.

"Tonks, wait."

"For what?" she snapped. "For you to find time in your busy self-pity schedule to work in a little snogging? Not bloody likely. I'm going to put on some clothing, make certain Teddy has something to distract him that won't bring the house down on our heads, and then, if I feel like it, I will return to find out what you need from me this time."

All her fuming did not keep him from admiring the way the towel shifted across her backside as she stomped out of the room. She'd flay him if he said a single word about it, but some suicidal part of him wanted to compliment her anyway. The last time he'd tried to tell her how beautiful she was, she had put her long fingers on his mouth to stop the words she refused to hear. And that was when she had liked him. It was unlikely she'd be open to listening to him sing her praises now.

"I am a complete fool," he said to the empty room. He could think of few things as reckless as stepping into her home uninvited. And yet, her defensive spells had not triggered when he'd come through the Floo. Neither had she hexed him, even though he deserved it. It might not have been the best reunion, but it was far better than he

had any right to expect.

So far.

He dropped onto his favorite chair and settled in to see what came next.

For itchyfoot, whose clever prompt took hold and won't let go.

Negotiation

Chapter 5 of 8

Sometimes, what is not said is as important as matters discussed aloud.

Tonks could have dressed herself with a flick of her wand, but it wouldn't have been as cathartic as tugging on tights and flinging things around the room in search of something that wouldn't make her feel... feel what? Like she wanted to kiss him and kill him at the same time? That was part and parcel of the way they operated.

"This is what comes from starting a relationship in the nutters wing," she muttered to herself. Not that madness had left any of them untouched, but she and Harry had been bad off.

"Him longer than me, that's for sure." She was glad no one witnessed the lie. She was no more 'cured' than Harry, but she was better at hiding it. Still, he had always been the quiet one, which is why his sudden appearance in her parlor had been so startling. It had also been refreshing, though she'd hardly tell him so.

She tripped over a pile of discarded clothing and barely kept herself from pitching headlong into the wall. The cloth wrapped around her ankle turned out to be one of her favorite skirts. It was an inch (perhaps two) shorter than her usual, but chances were good it would throw Harry off his game almost as much as her being wrapped in a towel had. She sometimes thought he would never grow up entirely. As irritating as she found that trait in others, remaining boyish only added to his appeal. She dropped a shirt over her head and went to check on her son.

Teddy was asleep on what had once been a giant stuffed dog. He hadn't needed magic to change the way the toy looked, just the creativity and will of a child. And a fair amount of frustration. Giraffe spots covered the front half of the creature, while zebra stripes covered the back. Several markers lay on the floor, open and drying. The tail was missing entirely, though it had been replaced with a stuffed snake. One of the former dog's legs lay in the corner, stuffing bulging obscenely from the top. Teddy's hand was buried to the knuckles in the dog-body hole, his head resting against the neck of the toy, drool slowly soaking one canine ear. She heeded the old adage to let mangled dogs and underage vivisectionists lie. It seemed the safest course of action. There was plenty of danger waiting in the parlor.

Harry sat in the worn armchair, legs stretched out before him, head tilted back. He did a very good impression of someone who was completely relaxed, but she knew he watched from under mostly-closed eyelids, and his hand twitched toward the pocket where he kept his wand. His attachment to the tools of magic wouldn't be a problem if he wasn't so intent on rejecting the world of it.

She could not imagine life without magic. She even slept with her wand beneath her pillow. At the moment, it was in her hand. She lit candles around the room and watched Harry pretend to not notice. She set the fire ablaze. "Lighting is so important for a proper row, don't you think?"

He opened one eye at that. "Are we still arguing? I thought we'd move to negotiation."

"Call it what you will, the process is much the same."

"I prefer other methods to diffuse a situation." The edges of his mouth quirked up, so quick she almost missed it.

"You're not the one setting terms," she countered.

"Fair enough." He sat up straight, all business now. "I need your help creating new charms to ward Dudley's house."

She snorted, then realized he was serious. "Tell him to get a dog. That will do to keep out most Muggles."

"He's worried that some rogue wizard will decide to attack his house to get to me."

"Seems a lot of effort to track down a Muggle who spent most of his life tormenting you, on the off chance you might like him enough to care."

"Not so difficult to find my childhood home, is it?"

She recoiled. "He's going to live **there**? What on earth for?"

"For the same reason Sirius went back to Grimmauld Place, I suppose. He doesn't have much choice. There's likely more to it than that, but we're talking about Dudley, so I'd rather not delve too deeply into his psyche. It's hard enough living with what I know of my own."

She stifled the urge to slap his head, only partly because she doubted he'd let her. "Leaving aside your amazing capacity for self-degradation, why do you want to go back to that place?"

"He's family, and I'm fresh out otherwise. Also, he's almost human these days."

"And?"

Harry sighed. "And he won't leave my flat until I help him out."

"Why come to me?" she asked.

"You hate him slightly less than most." Truth, but not why he'd picked her. "And because you're my friend."

"You've a world of friends, Harry, even though you choose to ignore them. Sending a single owl to the Ministry would result in a crew of witches and wizards descending on

the house to protect it from every possible threat, including natural disaster."

"Yes, and everyone would notice and wonder why. Publicity would defeat the point."

She couldn't fault his logic.

"Will you at least look at the place and give me advice as to how to go about it?"

"If I help you, what then?" she asked.

He frowned. "Then the house is made safe? I'm not following."

"No, I don't expect you are. Say I do this for you, and your wretched cousin feels secure, what happens next?"

He looked perplexed. "Um, everyone goes home."

"Right then. " She doused the actual flames to make way for the Floo. "Get out."

He stared at her blankly.

"Are you deaf? I suppose so, since you ignored me when I told you to stay away. Let me say this a little louder." She filled her lungs. "Bugger off! Now!"

He did not move. "So, this is about before."

She laughed, hard and bitter. "Did you expect me to ignore it and just do whatever you asked of me?"

"Not really, but I had to try." He stood. "If you want me to leave, I will. If you want to have a row, we will. If you just want to scream at me until you feel better, that's fine. Just let me know which path we're taking so I can prepare."

She stared at him. "I think I could learn to hate you."

"From what I understand, that's not difficult. I'm fairly sure it's still a requirement to get into Slytherin." Humor warred with pain, a brief struggle before he masked his features with calm.

"When did I ever take the easy road?"

He finally smiled, a real one. "Never. One of many things I like about you."

"What, that I'm thick?"

Once again, he looked her up and down, gaze lingering on cleavage she'd not meant to show. She really did need to work out a good laundry spell. And maybe one for organizing her clothing, so she didn't accidentally pull on a low-cut shirt.

"Not thick at all," he said.

"You're a pig." Her heart was not in the insult.

He shrugged. "Despite what you insist on believing, I find you beautiful."

"So you've said." She stared into the corner so she did not see the look in his eyes.

"What do I need to do to convince you to help me?"

When she turned to answer, she found he'd stepped in, a little too close. Instinct told her to lean into him, let him hold her up for a while, but she could not afford to give in. "I will think about it."

"Should I beg?" He sank to his knees and looked up at her.

She swallowed hard and fought the urge to thread her fingers through his hair and tug, ever so slightly. His shoulders had widened, and his chest, too. Nothing about him resembled the frail young man who'd spent too long in the bed next to hers. Nothing but his eyes. He never had been able to hide what went on there, not from her. The raw need for something so much more than he professed to want had been her undoing the first time. To see it undiminished was almost more than she could handle.

She shook her head and willed her hair to shift from red to near black. "No, you should let me think on it. I will send an owl, and you will accept it, or that's an end to the whole thing."

"Send it to Little Whinging, the back entrance, if you don't mind."

"As you like." She held out her hand.

He took it, pulling her closer as he stood, but not closing the distance entirely.

She should have known better than to touch him. Memories skipped over her skin, through her blood, pooling warm in places left cold too long. She should know better.

They both should.

He let her fingers slide from his grip and stepped back. "Best I get home. No telling what Dudley's done to my kitchen."

She nodded, mute.

"Have a good night, Tonks." His gaze lingered on her like a promise.

"You too." It came out soft, husky.

He tossed the Floo powder and disappeared into flames a shade of green that had nothing to do with anger.

For *itchyfoot*, who has been very patient.

Ghosts of the Living

Chapter 6 of 8

Harry and Dudley return to Privet Drive, where a surprise awaits them.

Dudley's car was practical but still a bit sporty, as if he fought the inevitable push toward becoming his father. It was early yet, but Harry could see it happening, like one of Professor Trelawny's visions, only with a better chance of coming true. He wondered if, due to their expanded lifespan, wizards took longer to become their parents, then decided that unlikely. Before they'd left school or left what had been left of it Draco had been well on his way to becoming his father, albeit with far less charisma. Ron had never had much choice but to turn into his dad, as all the brothers before him had shunned their responsibility in that arena, with the possible exception of Bill, who had narrowly escaped by marrying a French woman of exotic descent.

It was a pretty conceit to think that any of them had a choice as to what path their lives took, when those who paid attention recognized that the students had been pawns in a greater game than any they'd thought they were playing. As satisfying as it might be to believe that their generation had done such amazing things that children hearing stories in generations to come would be astounded, it was more than a little likely that those same children would be in the process of being manipulated by people who were supposed to be looking out for their welfare, only to realize years later that they, too, had been taken for a ride.

All that brilliance in a school purporting to be safe, all those world-famous witches and wizards, that vast collection of knowledge, and the powers that be had left the fate of the world in the hands of teenagers. It would have served them right if the kids had muffed it. Of course, if they **had** failed, Harry would hardly have had the leisure to ruminate on the many ways in which he'd been let down. It was a privilege, really, and he knew it, but admitting that wasn't nearly as gratifying as being righteously pissed off.

As they wove their way through Little Whinging, Harry pretended to not notice every turn, every landmark, every temporary hiding place he'd found in the years before he'd learned to be enough of a bully to threaten his family with some horrible curse if they didn't back off. Only fair, as he'd learned by watching, and had been sufficiently tortured to the point where everyone knew the threats had real weight. Yet here he was, returning to the scene of multiple crimes, intent on helping Dudley, who had taken the most joy in assaulting him over the years.

"Our family dynamic is a bit perverse," Harry said.

Dudley snorted not the figurative sort, but a genuinely pig-like sound. "Just come to that conclusion, did you?"

Harry actually laughed. "No."

"Most people chat about the weather when they want to make small talk." Dudley pulled the car onto Privet Drive.

"Most people can't change the weather if they don't like it." As if to prove a point, the sun dropped behind a cloud. Harry grinned when Dudley flinched. "Relax. I don't have my wand out."

"Good thing, too. Wouldn't want the neighbors to see a man waving his wand about. Makes a terrible first impression."

"I grew up here. It's long past time for first impressions."

Dudley shrugged. "Between the banking crisis and unemployment, there's been a lot of people forced out of their homes. The economy is doing a bang up job of upending the way things used to be in this neighborhood."

"Listen to you, talking like you understand the big picture!" Harry imitated Aunt Petunia's shrill sing-song. "Is my Dudders all grown up? Such a smart little man."

"I'm right next to you, and fully capable of knocking out your teeth," Dudley said with little menace.

"Aren't you afraid I'd attack you with magic?" Harry retorted.

"You'd still be missing some teeth."

"Good point." The entire exchange was so comfortingly familiar that Harry was startled to find the car had stopped. He opened his door and braced himself to face down the specters of his childhood.

As it turned out, he felt absolutely nothing when he walked through the door. It did not feel like the house in which he'd grown up. A change in paint and carpet did not alter the familiar layout, and seeing it completely void of furniture could not erase the things that had occurred there. He simply had no emotional reaction at all. That lack might have been disconcerting, considering that he had become hyper-emotional at the best of times (and the best of times had never taken place in this house), but he couldn't muster up enough interest to determine if he was concerted, much less dis.

Something had changed about the place, but what?

"All sorts of stuff," Dudley said.

"I really need to stop doing that," Harry muttered.

"What, talking as if there was no one around? You might want to consider rebuilding some sort of social life. It will keep you from turning into a loon. Well, more of a loon, anyway."

"Thank you, mister sensitivity. Now, shut it for a minute. I need to think."

Rather than taking offense, Dudley took himself to the kitchen.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when he was alone. Even a few days with constant company had worn on his nerves. There was simply too much stimuli, a thousand small noises that made him twitch or wake with a start. Here, there was nothing. Neither the lingering smell of fireplace ash nor creak of a board under his foot triggered a response. He went to the cupboard door and opened it, sure of some reaction to that cramped space. His knight sat on the shelf above where his makeshift bed used to be. He could muster no sorrow for the sad little boy who had lived there.

"There is something seriously wrong here." He could not even manage a soupcon of dread at the thought that someone had been in the house before them and laid down a spell of some sort. At the very least, he ought to have been nervous.

"Magic, then." It was the logical conclusion, and hence the logical solution. And one he'd been avoiding whenever possible for some years now.

Running through every possible counter spell did no good, which was not surprising, since he had no idea what he was trying to counter. The reveal spells he knew were no help, either.

In the kitchen, Dudley fumbled about, but he might as well have been across town for all Harry cared about the usually nerve-grinding racket. The effects of the unknown spell were increasing. Harry remained absolutely, perfectly calm.

He paced, not because he felt at all nervous, but because it seemed the thing to do. His wand rested loosely in his hand, as if he'd always felt comfortable with it there. And why not? He'd spent years learning how to use the thing, and it seemed a waste to refuse to use it regularly. Why had he? He could not remember.

His mobile rang. He stuffed his wand in one pocket and retrieved the phone from another. Hermione's picture waved at him an app of his own making. He would likely make a fortune if he could figure out how to make it work for Muggles, and if he felt the need to make a fortune. They would think it technology instead of magic, and he wasn't entirely sure they would be wrong.

"Hey," he said briefly, as that was all anyone expected of him these days.

"Harry!" At least Hermione had no problem being excited. "Put the knight down!" she shrieked.

He unfolded his fist to find the metal toy. He hadn't even realized he was still holding it. "Why?" he asked, completely unmoved by her distress.

"Idiot," she hissed. "For once in your life, do as I tell you and ask why later."

He did. Not a bloody thing changed, which he told her.

"I did not expect it to change, but at least you've stopped it from getting worse. What are you doing at Privet Drive?" She seemed somehow offended.

"Helping Dudley." He felt no need to elaborate.

"And did nothing strike you as odd?"

"Besides my willingness to help Dudley, or to come here, or to use magic when it makes my skin crawl most of the time?"

"Actually, yes, besides all that." She was pretending to be patient. Hermione was not a very good actress, but it was funny when she tried.

He thought very hard. "I should probably be upset about something, yeah? Or maybe sad. But I'm not. I don't even feel angry. I wonder how long it's been since I was not angry. A decade, at least."

"Yes, well, enjoy it while you can."

"It's not particularly fun, though it's not not-fun, either."

She sighed, that special sigh she had when she'd been especially clever and it had backfired in some way. "Stay put. I will be there momentarily."

The phone went dead. Harry stuffed it back into his pocket and sat quietly on the floor.

Dudley stood in the doorway. "Who was that?"

"Hermione. She's coming over."

"How did she know you were here?" Dudley asked.

Harry tilted his head. "I didn't think to ask her. You can if you want."

"Is she a lesbian, too?" That was Dudley, always asking the most important questions.

"Not that I've heard. Still not a great idea to flirt with her, though. She has no problem hexing people."

"Okay then." Dudley turned on his heel and returned to the kitchen.

Hermione appeared a few moments later, dressed in various shades of tan. It really wasn't her color, but Harry knew better than to say so. She looked around the room until she found the knight. Her eyes narrowed, as they almost always did when she focused on magic. She pointed her wand at the toy, said something unintelligible, and blew it right off the mantle.

"Hey!" Harry sputtered. "I **liked** that! What is wrong with you, popping up and destroying pieces of my childhood as if they mean nothing?" He grabbed the knight and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Oh, thank goodness you're irritated!" she said.

"I like that," he grumbled. "Did you want to kick me, for good measure?"

She rolled her eyes. "Grow up. You needed my help and I came, as I have always come. Someday, you will think to be grateful."

He stared at her a moment, taking measured, even breaths before speaking, just as he'd been taught. "You called me, so how is it you think I was asking for your help?"

"I did not say you asked. I said you needed me, and you do. Not just to remove the spell I put on that silly bit of metal, but also to tell you that it's high time you sought the other assistance you need. Unfortunately, I don't have time to discuss it right now. I was in the middle of something rather important."

"You usually are," Harry said. "But thanks for letting me know how helpless I am. For the record, what spell did you cast, and what were you doing casting spells in this house anyway?"

"*Cetera Desunt*. It's literal meaning is: the rest are missing." She used her lecturer tone. "I designed it myself to calm groups of people who were prone to panic very useful on unruly crowds and half-committed military. The committed ones seem to defy magic as well as logic. I'll find a way around that someday."

"Hermione," Harry said softly. "The spell."

"I had completely forgotten that I'd tested the spell on this place once your aunt and uncle moved out. It seemed as good a location as any, and I needed to be sure it worked on Muggles as well as magical folk. I never did get anyone to come inside, so I had to test and change it in the field. Does this version have the same effect on Dudley that it does on you?"

"I couldn't tell you. Dudley is strangely tranquil these days."

She peered down the hall. "Really? How odd."

"But it worked just fine on me. Which, by the way, makes me feel like someone replaced my nerves with metal wire and frayed them for good measure."

She turned back to him. "Why would it do that? It shouldn't."

Harry's first words were ground soundlessly between his teeth. She never did understand, but he couldn't fault her for it. "I'm particularly averse to having spells thrown at me. I'm even less thrilled about triggering them without warning. Also, experimenting on me is probably not the best idea in the long run. I hold grudges."

"Honestly, Harry, you are impossible," she huffed. "I developed the spell to **help** you, and others like you. You should be thanking me instead of pointing out the obvious and glowering."

"Thank you?" He stood, head and shoulders above her. "You want me to thank you for messing about with my feelings and making me a drone without so much as asking how I might feel about that?"

She sighed, the put upon sigh this time. "As I said, I don't have time for this fight. If I promise to have a rousing quarrel with you about this at a later date, will that do?"

His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out, as if she had cast *Muffliato* on him, which he knew she hadn't.

"Excellent!" She reached up and patted his cheek. "It was good to see you, Harry. You look well." Seconds later, she was gone with a little pop, leaving behind the scent of desert roses, pine tar, and superiority.

"Sometimes, I can't stand you," he said to the place where she was not.

As he wandered into the kitchen, he wondered why it was that women liked to schedule arguments instead of dealing with them straightaway.

For itchyfoot, who gives great prompt. I promise there will be kissing soon. ;)

Hand over Hand

Chapter 7 of 8

Tonks arrives at Privet Drive well aware of the difficult task before her.

Tonks did not reveal to the Ministry that Harry had not only accepted her owl, but replied promptly. The Minister would have taken it as a personal affront rather than a small measure of progress. Worse, the gossip would begin again, and Tonks had scarcely contained her ire during the last round. Harry ought to have been a big deal in the working of the Ministry, at least that had been the expectation. Still was, for some a bit too dense to recognize the cause of his reluctance. He'd fought in that place, lost people dear to him, uncovered too many secrets, been condemned. In fact, there were few places in either world where some ill had not befallen Harry. Including and especially the one before her.

Teddy tugged at her hand. "Shouldn't we ought to knock, so Uncle Harry knows we're here?"

She smiled down at her son. "He knows, Teddy. See, the door's opening now."

Teddy raced down the path. Before the door could even cast a shadow in the morning light, he flung himself through it.

"Oof!" The voice did not belong to Harry.

Tonks clutched her wand and lunged for the house, only barely remembering that Harry had asked her to keep a low profile. "Too late for that, isn't it?" she said under her breath.

Teddy stepped back, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked up with a fierce scowl. "Who are you, and what have you done with my Harry?"

Brave, crazy child. Tonks pulled up short and waited to hear the answer.

"Well, sprig, I'm Dudley. This is my house. Harry's my cousin. And you need some manners."

Tonks managed to keep her hair from catching fire at the audacity of Dudley Dursley telling anyone to mind their manners when he'd been such a beastly child himself. She patted at the wisp of smoke that came from a loose tendril. Someday, she'd have complete control again.

"But as it's the first time we met," Dudley continued, "and I think you were worried about Harry, I'll let it go this once. Next time, you'll be less threatening, yeah?"

Teddy nodded solemnly.

"That's all right then." Dudley looked up. "Why don't you and your mum come in. Harry has tea on, and I'm sure I smell bacon. If I'm lucky, he's made some for me, too."

"Cannibalism doesn't bother you?" The words came out before Tonks could stop them.

"I've had a bit of time to get over my earlier... attachments. A couple of surgeries and I'd all but forgotten it." Dudley held the door open to welcome her, as if he had not just laid down the most gentle rebuke Tonks had ever received.

She blinked stupidly at him, then remembered how to walk.

"Mind the step," Dudley said at the exact moment her heel caught on it. He reached out to steady her, then stepped back and let her pass. "He's in the kitchen."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Teddy creeping up the stairs.

Dudley waved her off. "I've got the boy. You go do whatever it is you people do."

"Such as eating breakfast?" Tonks quipped.

"If that helps." Dudley followed Teddy without looking back. A few seconds later, the boy shrieked, then burst into a fit of giggles in the upstairs hall.

When she entered the kitchen, time seemed to stop. Harry stood with his back to her, humming. The loose shirt could not hide the ripple of muscle as he reached up. She didn't know what he sought, as she wasn't capable of taking her eyes off him. A flash of skin at his waist opened up a book of memories - Harry wandering around the ward at night, shirtless and frail, half asleep, muttering; Harry standing at the window with a moonlit halo, his smile a ghost in the glass; Harry silent and steady, one hand on the back of a child in the grips of his first nightmare. She was suddenly glad he had not been facing her when she came in, or there would have been an entirely different set of memories.

"You've been working out." Stupid statements were apparently going to be the hallmark of her day.

"I found it helped." He flipped eggs one-handed and slid them onto a plate. "Have some, if you're hungry."

She shook her head, then realized he couldn't see her. "I'm set, thanks. Wouldn't mind if you'd leave some bacon for Teddy, though."

Harry turned to look for the boy. A loud thud and another squeal answered the unspoken question. "Keeping him busy. What a clever lad."

"Dudley, or Teddy?" Tonks asked.

"Either. Both." Harry leaned against the counter as he ate breakfast.

Tonks stared out the door, eyes slightly unfocused. It was safer that way. "So, you want me to reinstate all the prohibitions on traveling to this place that Pius Thicknesse laid down during the bad old days of Voldemort's Ministry."

"Ironic, I know."

"Only slightly more so than you helping Dudley do anything to this house but destroy it."

"I'm attempting to let go of past hurts." It sounded like something from a brochure for a rehabilitation program.

"How's that going?" she asked.

He placed the plate in the sink. "I'm not quite ready to visit Azkaban with forgiveness in my heart, but I no longer want to kill Draco."

"Not a bad start," Tonks conceded. "Would you stop someone else from killing him?"

Harry shrugged. "Hard to say. Is that terrible of me?"

"I'm not one to judge. I routinely conjure up replicas of Bellatrix just so I can destroy them."

"Statues, or something less substantial?" Harry asked.

"Ceramics make the best sound, but any pottery will do."

"Huh. That has potential."

"I'm full of good ideas," she said.

"You always were." The heated look in his eyes froze her to the spot.

"Not always," she protested.

"Often enough." He moved toward her, slowly and at an angle, as if afraid she'd bolt.

His cautious approach sparked more memories, the ones she'd labeled 'crawling out of the pit.' They'd helped each other find a hold, offered a hand up when footing seemed impossible because no one else could see the hole they were in. She'd never thanked him, or if she had, she couldn't recall. He had thanked her until she'd made him stop. That had been the first time she'd put her fingers on his lips. He'd kissed her palm and held onto her hand and said nothing. It had taken a long time for her to admit she loved him, but that had been the moment she knew it.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. Before, when I left." As if he could have meant anything else.

"Wasn't the leaving that hurt," she replied. "I understand the need to go to ground, to deal with the demons in your head. Nimue's tits, Harry! I, of all people, understand. It was not coming back that caused the damage."

"I suppose it's too late, now."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You'd have to travel a long way, I'm afraid." About six meters, but she wasn't inclined to make it easy by telling him so.

"I'm also trying to practice patience," he said with a grin.

"I have the perfect program for that."

He cocked his head and waited for her to go on.

"Spend time with a five-year-old, on a regular basis, especially if there is something you absolutely must get done during that time. You'll learn right quick how to keep your cool long enough to distract a miniature person whose mind works far, far faster than you ever remembered yours doing when you were a tyke. Then, when you've figured out exactly what to do to get a sliver of time to yourself, everything will change, and you'll be forced to start again."

"Is that your way of inviting me over?" he teased.

"Depends. Do I have to stay?" she shot back.

"I wouldn't dream of telling you what to do. You don't take well to that." He kept his distance while still closing it. "Most of the time, anyway."

She suddenly wished there was a table between them, something to keep him from getting close enough to touch. It would be all over, then. She knew agreeing to this had been a bad idea. And yet, she would have been devastated if he'd gone to anyone else. Therein lay the crux of her problem. She simply could not turn away from him, much less let him go, but it was damnably hard to keep him.

"I don't know what to do with you," she blurted out.

"You did, once." There were layers and layers beneath those words.

"It didn't work out the way I expected." She backed away as he advanced.

"Nothing ever does go according to plan, but that doesn't make a good idea bad. Maybe all it needed was better execution."

"Oh?" She ran out of room to retreat.

"Mmm," was all he managed before his lips were on hers, gentle, warm, familiar. The world fell away at the touch of his mouth, the tangle, heat, pressure, strength.

"Oh," she sighed.

"Pity there's no bed in this house," he murmured against her neck.

"There are two other people here," she squeaked.

"There is that." His breath tickled her ear.

"And I ought be telling you how very upset I am with you." Which might have been easier without the ache of need that suffused her.

He kissed the edge of her jaw. "I am sure you will berate me with alarming frequency."

"The knob on the cupboard is digging into my back." Words she hadn't meant to say broke the spell they had begun weaving without thought.

He stepped back. "I didn't... I mean..." He shut his mouth and clenched his fist.

"If you try to tell me you kissed me by accident or lied to me about being sorry you buggered off without even leaving a note, then I will be forced to challenge you to a duel right here. And you're more than a little rusty."

He stared at her for a moment, fingers twitching toward his wand.

She held her ground until she saw his shoulders drop. Only then did she consider the danger of threatening him, even if he ought to know she would never do him harm.

"I am out of practice," he admitted, "with just about everything."

She folded her arms and leaned back against the cabinet. The knob struck a knot in her back and she hissed. "You may want to do something about that."

"I thought I was."

She licked her kiss-swollen lips. "That patience thing you were on about earlier? Start with that."

"I expect it to take me a very long time to perfect."

"You let me know when you've got it down."

"Oh, I think you'll know." His smile held too many promises.

From above came a thump, a roar, thundering footsteps, and peals of laughter.

Tonks looked up and shook her head. "We may want to start working before your cousin arrives and gives you grief about blushing like a schoolboy." She turned her back on him and began tracing wards.

"I am not blushing," Harry said firmly. "And I wasn't even a boy when I was supposed to be."

She ignored the last statement, as they both knew it to be true. "It's just a bit warm in here is all. Nothing to do with you pinning me against a wall and kissing me."

"Concentrate," he growled, and she could feel his magic building up. "This is serious business."

"As it pleases you," she said in her huskiest voice.

He choked on the words of a simple alarm spell, cursed, and started again.

She laughed and finished her ward without saying another word.

For itchyfoot, who let me play with her idea.

Moving in Tandem

Chapter 8 of 8

Tonks and Harry rediscover what it is they lost.

Dudley came into the kitchen. "Okay if I take the sprog to the park? He needs a bit of room to run that won't result in me having to re-plaster." The aforementioned child hung on the crook of his arm like a ragdoll.

Tonks assured herself that Teddy was breathing, then granted permission. Before the pair left, Teddy snaked out an arm and nicked the rest of the bacon.

"There's a smart boy," Dudley said as the door closed behind them.

"I think you've found your babysitter," Harry said. "They make quite a pair."

"That's not at all disturbing," Tonks said drily.

"Could be worse. You could leave him with Ron."

Tonks laughed. "When even his own family has stopped doing that? I don't think so."

"I miss him," Harry said quietly.

"The feeling is mutual. You should ring him up, go for a beer some time."

"Just like that?" Harry scoffed. "He'd have every right to hang up on me."

"Just like that," Tonks said firmly. "And he won't. He's waiting for you to make the first move."

Harry groaned. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life apologizing to everyone I know, aren't I?"

"That's your choice, but most of your friends won't require one." Tonks finished the last ward on the kitchen. "It's me who won't let you off the hook easily."

"Nor should you." Harry followed her past the cupboard and up the stairs.

"Which room should we start in?" Tonks asked.

"End of the hall."

As Harry moved past, his shoulder brushed hers. The urge to press him back against the wall hit her hard. She breathed easier when he continued on. Her reactions to him had never been subtle, and they appeared to be getting less so over time. It was bloody inconvenient, considering what she wanted from him. Well, aside from what she wanted **right now**, which was also inconvenient.

Harry repeated the spells he'd cast downstairs, his wand work smoother, his voice stronger. He was rushing, though, his shoulders tense, body nearly still save for his wand hand. He didn't like this room at all. Tonks modified the wards for the second story windows to include a nasty fall. She knew that design well enough to match his haste.

They were back in the hall in minutes, his breathing a bit rough.

"That wasn't your room, was it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Mine was here."

She pushed open the door he indicated and stopped short of entering. Unlike the other rooms, this one was fully furnished. A young Harry could have lounged on that bed and she would not have found it at all unusual. Unsettling, perhaps, but so many things were.

He inhaled sharply, just behind her. "He left it intact."

"It's like a shrine," she whispered.

Harry shook himself like a dog coming out of the rain. "I suspect Dudley thought I might want some of this. Either that, or he was waiting for me to clean it out myself. He's still a bit lazy." Harry put great effort into attempting to sound casual.

She took her cue from him and went straight for the practical. "Is there anything you want here?"

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Not in this room."

She cuffed him on the shoulder, walked past him, and began casting. He started on the complimentary spells. The blend of their voices was familiar, comforting, and Tonks lost herself in the words. They took their time, respecting the preserved space while willfully ignoring all the possible implications of it. They finished together, then stood in silence for a moment, the past unspooling in tatters. He did not have to tell her where his thoughts went, and she would do him the same courtesy. They had been each other's lifeline time and again. This was no different.

"I should keep this." Harry held up a lamp. "It's the same one Dobby tried to smash against his head as penance for some imagined transgression."

"Not imagined," Tonks said. "He believed it all until you came along."

Harry stared at the lamp and said nothing, but he tucked it under his arm when they left the room. He set it down long enough to secure Dudley's room, then carried it to the kitchen and set it on the counter by the back door. His shoulders sagged.

"I didn't save the world," he said.

"You did."

"Not me alone. Every step of the way, people held me up, pointed me on, kept me from despair."

"I know." Tonks wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her cheek on his back.

"I couldn't have done it at all without Dobby."

"Probably not, though you would have tried."

"Did I have a choice?" The words were caustic, bitter.

"As much as any of us did. Fight or surrender. Live or die. It all boils down to that. Move forward or stay home and hope the world gets by without you."

Harry snorted. "Subtle."

"I never claimed to be anything but blunt. You still have choices. If you want people to let you go away, we'll see that they do. You can't ask them to forget you."

He put his hands over hers and leaned back. "If I asked you to let me disappear, you would?"

"Certainly not," she huffed into his shoulder blade. "I'd make sure other people left you alone, but you're stuck with me one way or another. You're the only one I can talk to about St Mungo's. Or the only one whose eyes don't fill with pity before the sudden realization that something vital demands immediate attention, far, far from wherever I am."

"You won't get pity from me," Harry agreed. "Though I am guilty of that last part."

"Guilt is almost as useless as pity."

"So, if I'm not guilty, and you aren't inclined to let me run off forever, why were you so angry when I came to see you?"

She stepped back. "Forget what I just said. I totally hold you to blame for not contacting me. I was trying to figure out what to do about that, working myself into a good snit, and you decide to come back on your own."

He turned to face her. "You're angry at me for not waiting for you to be more angry at me?"

"No, I..." Her thoughts refused to arrange themselves in anything resembling a coherent order.

"If I was a complete rotter, I would kiss you in hopes that it would be pleasing enough to avert a row."

"Don't want to argue." She gave herself a mental pat on the back for forming something resembling a sentence.

"Nor do I, but I suspect we have to hash this out sometime." He took her hands in his. "I am truly sorry for being a complete wanker, for upsetting you and Teddy, for not having enough sense to know when I had it really, really good."

She stared up into his eyes and saw herself reflected in his gaze. "Apology accepted. **Now** you can kiss me."

"Just like that?" he asked.

"It's not as though I can stop loving you, is it? And you are very, very good at the whole snogging bit. Distract me well enough, and I may forget half of what I had planned to say to you."

"You know it will never be that easy for us," he said softly.

She barked out a laugh. "Nothing is easy with us, but what's a little more hard work, when we've come this far?"

He pulled her close and trailed butterfly kisses up her neck until his breath tickled her ear.

"Speaking of work, we should finish the job here," he murmured.

"Mmm, and I should not have given in so easily. Why not call it a draw and kiss me properly?"

He smiled at her that secret smile she was almost certain no one else had ever seen and proceeded to make her forget all her grievances, if only because there was no point in thinking at all when his thumb was grazing her hip, and his leg was wrapped around hers, and her pulse beat a tattoo in her ears that matched the pounding of his heart, and she knew beyond all doubt that he loved her.

Trumpets blared, not exactly what she'd expected from the music of the spheres.

"Bugger," Harry said against her lips. He waved his wand and muttered, "*Desistare*."

Tonks pulled back. "That's a bit old-school."

"True, but very few wizards will think to use it, considering how long ago it fell out of favor for being too simple. If I'd made it so it could be canceled with *Finite Incantatem*, then it wouldn't be a very good alarm system, would it?"

"Um, Harry? Dudley's not a wizard, and I doubt he wants this racket every time he comes home from work."

"Dudley didn't set it off. Teddy did." As if to punctuate his words, giggles drifted to them.

"And what happens if a wizard does manage to get past our wards and protections?" she asked.

He went back to exploring her curves while keeping one eye on the doorway. "I suppose the Ministry will have to dispatch someone to see what the problem is."

"How would they know about it?"

"Because I keyed it to them. He may be my cousin, but I don't want to spend my whole life looking after him, especially when there's an entire organization which has insisted, repeatedly, that they are in charge." The last was spoken into her collarbone.

"So, you're going to tell them how to shut down the spells? Makes all this seem pointless." She thought she heard footfalls on the stairs, but could not be sure over the pounding of her heart.

"No, the only one who will be able to shut down the alarm, besides me, and probably you, is Dudley himself." Harry turned her gently and pulled her back against his chest. His fingers played over her hip bones.

"A Muggle." She hoped he inferred the rest of whatever she might have said, as she found herself unable to form complex sentences a common side effect of having her body pressed against his.

"Not any Muggle," he replied as his hands slid up over her ribs. "A very **specific** Muggle."

She took a deep breath so what if it sounded like a gasp and spoke carefully. "That's a very fine piece of spellcraft."

"I've been working on it since that night on the balcony." He might have meant the spell, but perhaps not.

She flushed at the memory. "I can see why you might have wanted something precise after that particular incident."

"And why I've kept it simple." He spun her around, kissed her swiftly, and stepped to the side. "The purpose is to make Dudley feel, and be, safe, not instruct him in the finer points of Latin and spells."

"You are far better to him than he deserves."

"He is, that," Dudley said from the doorway. "But he needs me."

Tonks turned to face him, hoping desperately that she was no longer blushing. Harry would never let her forget it. Dudley held a perfectly bland expression a few seconds too long, revealing that he had, in fact, seen them separate.

"Why do you think Harry needs you?" she asked.

"Because I'm the only one who won't kowtow to him. Or I was, until he pulled his head out of his arse and asked you to have him back."

Her hair turned pure white. "Has he?"

Before Dudley could answer, Harry stepped between them. "I have. I am. At least, I would. If you would, that is."

She laughed. "Don't hurt yourself. I'll give you another chance, but please stop trying to ask for one."

"I figured she was in when you were grinding " Dudley choked and fell silent at the two wands raised in his direction.

"Maybe we should talk about something else," Harry said softly. "Or wait until there's not a child about."

"Right, then. Minding my own business."

Tonks gave Dudley a pat as she walked by him. "See, smarter than we all thought."

"I can learn, anyway." He turned to listen to Harry explain the magical protections.

Tonks went in search of Teddy, giving each room a final spell check. He was not upstairs, and a survey of the small yard from the window did not reveal her son. She didn't panic. Teddy was very good at hiding. On her way to the back door for the inevitable search of the hedges, she noticed a light coming from under the stairs. She opened the little door to find Teddy curled up in a ball, snoring softly.

Harry stepped up beside her. "Let me, please."

She nodded and backed up.

Harry bent down and scooped up the sleeping boy. "He's done in."

"I'm ready to get off my feet, too," she admitted. "If you're through with this place, I'd like to go home."

"Can I call you tomorrow?" he asked.

She stared at him, unable to fathom how he could be so slow when they had just been going very fast indeed. She willed her hair crimson, just so he would get the point, and said, "No, you idiot. You can wake me tomorrow. I'll be cursed if I let you get me all worked up and then leave me again and you will literally be cursed if you try it. Now, hang on tight to my boy. We're going home."

"I wasn't going to presume," he said.

"How very noble of you, but my threat stands. Come home with me, or go into hiding forever." She raised her wand, then realized that they could not, in fact, leave in the usual manner. So much for dramatic exits.

"We're going to have to find a different way to get where we want to go," Harry said, trying very hard not to smile.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose we are."

Finite

for itchyfoot, who sent me on this journey. Thank you for the chance to tell this story. I hope you like it. :)