

Runs in the Family

by bwildered

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Some things had to be done alone. The young boy scuttling down the corridor and casting anxious glances over his shoulder wasn't sure exactly why certain things had to be done this way, he just felt it. His mouth was dry, and his palms were wet; fear felt so uncomfortable. But if he were honest, fear wasn't the only emotion coursing through his throbbing veins. Deep down, there was a sense of urgency... a need.

But his need did not control him. He had planned for this moment, bided his time and worked to ensure the need was satisfied on his terms. Too many acted impulsively, and he had seen what it could do to a person. Far better to be cautious... Maybe that was why the Sorting Hat had chosen not to put him in Gryffindor? From his understanding, Gryffindors favoured action over planning. A small frown marred his pale, sweat-beaded forehead. *But what of Aunt Hermione?*

His thoughts scattered when he saw the window, and a small smile curved his lips. Rose had been right; Hagrid did keep a window open for any stray familiars wishing to return home. Glancing along the corridor, he detached himself from the shadows and darted across to the open window. The night was cold: a bitter herald of winter's approach. Tugging his cloak tighter, he lifted a leg and straddled the sill. Looking down, he gulped. It was higher than he'd thought.

Or maybe this is why I wasn't Sorted into Gryffindor? he mused, feeling nauseous at the thought of leaping.

Carefully, he eased himself through the window until his chest rested across the sill and his feet dangled outside; his eyes were wide, watching the floor blur and blue spots dance. It was at this point when he questioned the wisdom of his actions. This was why he wasn't in Ravenclaw, either.

Choice was out of the question. He didn't have the strength in his arms to pull himself back in. Stretching out his legs and pointing his toes, he tried to feel for the ground, his feet flailing as he sought some clue. He thought he could feel something lightly striking the side of his shoe, but he wasn't sure. Again, choice was out of the question. His frantic kicks caused him to slip.

When his heart slipped from his mouth back into his chest, he noticed his fingers were almost level with the sill. The ground must have been mere inches beneath his feet. Closing his mouth, he looked around sheepishly and wiped his sweat slicked hands on his trousers.

In the moonlight, the grass was a deep turquoise and the gravel paths criss-crossing the courtyard were silvery trails. It was eerily beautiful. The cold breeze stirred the short grass and chilled his rapid breath into a ghostly vapour. He fancied he looked like one of Aunt Hermione's belching alembics.

Taking stock, he looked around. The goal of his nightly jaunt was about one hundred metres in front of him. There was no cover between here and there. He glanced up and studied the dark, empty windows peppering the castle walls: there were so many of them! He swallowed nervously. From those black holes, countless eyes could be watching him. He shuddered, but after a moment, thinking and shivering, he straightened. Of course he'd be in trouble, but that would be afterwards, and by then, he hoped it would have been worth it.

In the distance, he saw the tree stretching up into the starry sky; moonlight glimmered off its many leaves and bathed the gently swaying limbs. It looked bizarrely intelligent, hulking over its secret... like the hawks he'd seen out on the fields, mantling their kill. He shuddered again. He knew he didn't really fear getting caught. He feared doing this. But need was sometimes more powerful than fear.

Licking his lips, he bobbed on the spot. He'd practised this. Once he'd heard the tale of how his dad had gotten past the Whomping Willow, he'd practised. In the garden back home, he'd spent weeks, running and throwing a small stone at a target. He could hit something the size of a Knut from ten yards with a small stone. When his mum had asked him what he was doing, he'd fibbed and told her he was trying to see if he could be a Chaser. Her red eyebrow had arched, but she had seemed pleased he wanted to follow in her broom trails. She'd ruffled his black hair and told him the Quaffle was much bigger.

Inside his pocket was a stone from his yard: the best of the bunch. His hand curled around it; it was cold and smooth and fitted into his palm as though it belonged there. It was perfect. During the days at Hogwarts, he had studied the trunk, looking for the knot which quietened the tree. He had studied until he swore he could hit the knot with his eyes closed.

Inhaling sharply, he withdrew his hand and stone and ran towards the willow. His legs pounded on the grass, his heart hammered, and the cold air burnt his nose and chest. Squinting and focusing, he slowed fractionally, aimed and threw the black stone. His breath lodged in his throat, and his eyes felt impossibly wide. He heard the branches above him creak threateningly, and he lifted his arms to protect himself from the impending lashing. He'd missed! After all that waiting and practising, and he'd missed. He wanted to scream and sob.

But the creaking stopped, and only the soft hushing of a breeze through leaves disturbed the tense silence. Panting, he lowered his hands and peeked upwards. Above him, thick branches criss-crossed the sky; they were close enough that he could see the veins in the oval leaves. They had paused mid-whomp. A laugh bubbled up. He straightened and turned on the spot, revelling in his power over the mighty and terrifying tree. But he had something to do. Sobering, he dashed off into the hole at the base of the tree and descended into the gloom.

Dangling roots and soil brushed against his face, but he ignored the dry, tickling sensation. Holding his wand before him, lighting the way, he followed the narrow and curving path. He knew it went quite a way—all the way to Hogsmeade—but with every step, he felt his heart sink further. Perhaps this wasn't the way anymore? Had the tunnel been diverted? It also struck home, just when a lump of soil fell and hit his back, that he was deep underground. How many tonnes of rock rested above him? He gulped and loped faster.

After several minutes, his pace slowed, and he scuffed his shoes against the rocks underfoot; he hadn't expected his task to be so tedious. Somehow, he felt cheated. However, his enthusiasm was rekindled when he saw a battered crate and the deeper darkness suggestive of an opening. His breath hitched. *I've had made it... finally!*

The crate creaked ominously when he pushed at it, and he hesitated. The wand wobbling in his hand, casting eerie shifting shadows over the walls only intensified his dread. Rose would have tutted and sighed at the melodrama. Personally, the dark maw and dancing shadows made him shiver. Swallowing past a lump the size of Hagrid's fist, he focused on the crate; he'd come too far to quit now. He grimaced as powdery wood billowed out and dried-up insects tumbled onto him. Holding his breath, he braced himself, and with a quick heave, the obstacle shifted.

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Extending his arm as far as he could, he aimed his illuminated wand into the dark. Strange patterns scurried over the wall as his arm trembled. To his left was a rectangular table, the dust thick on it, and just beyond was a doorway, the door hanging off its hinges.

This was the room his dad had spoken of, the room at the end of the tunnel. Time and dust had claimed it; there was nothing here to suggest anything had happened. He knew what had taken place here, and he had expected something... some tangible sign of the tragedy and the pain that haunted his father. But there was nothing.

He knew where to look; the story was ingrained on his soul. The wizard had fallen between the table and the tunnel mouth. Anxiety gripped him. This was real. This had really happened. A wizard had been murdered here, despite the emptiness and the room's attempt at a cover-up. Summoning up some courage, he shuffled into the basement room. His wide eyes strained as he approached the spot; there was nothing there. He sagged and released the breath he'd held since entering the room. For some inexplicable reason, he'd expected the body to be there.

Severus Snape had fallen here. He had bled to death on this floor. There were plaques up at the Castle, making careful and beautiful note of the people who had died, but here, there was no plaque. Here, there wasn't even a clue. He sniffed and wiped a finger under his nose. No one knew what happened to his body. Aunt Hermione had told him that when they'd returned to make sure Snape had the burial he deserved, the body had gone. It had been dragged away.

He couldn't understand why she'd been so angry about that. It wasn't the same quick anger that burst out of mum when something happened; it seemed deeper and longer. When Mum snapped at Dad or Uncle Ron, she seemed to fill up with anger and pop, like a balloon. After the bang, it all settled down. There were no hurt or hard feelings about it. But when Aunt Hermione spoke about Snape's body going missing, it seemed that the anger was a part of her, not something that came and went. He wondered what it felt like to carry it around: something that could never pop, just filling up all the time.

A scuttling jarred him from his thoughts, and his arm swept round towards the sound. In the trembling light, he saw a black, beetle-like insect scurrying across the wall, heading for a crack in the plaster where the wall met a tall cupboard. He shivered. He could cope with pretty much anything, but creepy-crawlies disturbed him. The room didn't have what he was looking for, so he gladly left it to the dust and bugs.

After ascending the stairs from the basement, he walked into what could have been the parlour. Moonlight lanced in through gaps in the haphazard wooden slats nailed across the glassless windows. Dust danced in the beams before tickling his nose. The room was an odd mix: harsh contrasts of light and dark and dust-softened time-worn edges. Rubbing his nose, he raised his wand. The shack was pretty much as his father had described it: dusty, desolate and ruined.

His hungry eyes glanced around, taking in every detail. Huge scars ran down the perishing plaster, and chunks had been bitten out of what remained of the furniture. Could ghosts do that? His dad had never mentioned such damage in his stories. What kind of creature had been in here?

Chairs lay at odd angles on the floor, almost like their occupants had fled, knocking furniture over as they went. It was odd to see the hint of such activity when nothing had moved in decades.

Is this how those sailors felt when they first searched the Marie Celeste? he mused, while picking his way past a dresser. The evidence of activity in an abandoned and forgotten environment was jarring his senses, making him uncomfortable.

He'd felt something like it before, when he was young. There was a photo on his mum's desk—she wept over it sometimes—and he used to sneak peeks at it. It was a photo of his uncles: Fred and George. They had just opened their joke shop. On one occasion, he had climbed onto the chair and plucked the frame down, but it was empty. The young men weren't in it. He'd tilted the photo and tried to peer down the sides of the frame to see if they were hiding, but he couldn't see anyone. Streamers and party poppers fluttered about, a cup rolled on its side on the table in the background, and a few balloons drifted past, their strings trailing after them. It had made him ache to see them again. The picture cried out to have Fred and George back in it. Everything said that they should be there... it wasn't right without them. The shack was making him ache in a similar way.

It wasn't quite the same, though, he thought uneasily. He had ached to see Fred and George because he needed them and they'd always been there. But here, it was a different kind of ache... it wasn't that needy ache of wanting something back to as it should be. It was the ache you get when you feel out of place, alone, and confused. It's like the first time something bad happens, and you want to understand it, but you can't. It's like a frantic, fearful lump in your chest, pressing out your breath and making you desperate to know what it all means.

Focus! he snapped. *Getting spooked isn't going to help me find the ghost. Although, if this is the most haunted place in Britain, then they're all either away on holiday or... something has scared them away!*

He wished he hadn't thought it. Paralysed halfway across the room, he strained to listen. Was something following him, watching him? Just how fresh were those claw marks on the walls? He was sure even Rose would be scared now!

Leaving seemed a good idea. All he had to do was turn on his heel, walk out the door, back into the cellar and then along the tunnel: easy! It was a shame that his legs didn't seem to think so. Another thought slithered along, giving him goose-bumps and snatching his breath: he hadn't told anyone. The earliest anyone would know he was gone was in about two hours when his dorm mates woke up, and only then if they weren't too hungry to rush off to the Great Hall without waking him. *So much for planning!* he thought grumpily.

While he tried to cajole his feet into moving, his eye caught something tucked tight in the far right corner of the room. He'd seen it when he'd come in, but hadn't observed it: it hadn't sunk in what it was. At first, it had been a patch of moonlight in a sea of shadow, but now, it seemed too white, and it didn't quite work with all the angles. The puzzle distracted him from his panic, and he worked to solve it. The patch curved round slightly, and a shadow seemed to fall across the far right edge of it, as though the patch was in fact a solid shape. The shadow underneath was too black to be normal, and again, it seemed to signify a solid shape.

He traced the outline with his gaze, following the curves and noting the soft changes in tone and hue. By the time his eyes returned to the start, he knew what he was looking at.

"Arrrggghhh!" he yelled, stumbling back and tripping over one of the displaced chairs. He fell hard onto his rump, but his mind was focused solely on the form emerging from the shadows.

The white patch had been the edge of a collar, and the darker outline a black jacket. The man had used his clothes to blend in with his surroundings. With his face turned away so his pale skin couldn't give him away, he'd had an almost perfect hiding place.

The boy shuffled backwards, the light from his wand dancing wildly back and forth across the ceiling as he retreated. His green eyes were wide and terror-stricken as the man swooped down on him with an expression of the utmost dislike marring his features.

He may not have been Sorted into Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, but some aspect of him must have reflected those qualities because he managed to get to his knees and aim his wand, looking the man dead in the eye. The impact was immediate. The pale, thin man stopped dead.

"I... I'm not afraid to use this," he said in what he hoped was a determined manner.

They stood facing each other. His heart hammered in his chest; he'd never been this terrified... not even when James had put centipedes in his bed. The man opposite didn't seem suitably cowed by his threat and was studying him with an almost analytical interest. After what felt an age, the stranger smiled wryly and eased back from his invasive study.

"Most boys your age aren't, unfortunately," croaked the figure hoarsely.

He frowned; that had seemed like an insult. "Yes, well, we get taught all these spells and curses, so we know what we're doing, okay!" he said in way of defending boys across the world.

"You're from Hogwarts," the man said, indicating the badge sewn onto the cloak. "You'd best get back before they miss you." The words in themselves were thoughtful, but from his throat and with those black eyes boring into him, they seemed more like a disappointment, as though he had failed some task.

It confused him. He'd been planning what to say to escape the potential axe-wielding maniac, but here he was, being dismissed. It was strange. In that moment of realigning realities, he considered the stranger carefully, and as he did so, something clicked.

"You're him," he cried out.

At the outburst, the man scowled and skulked back—well, not man, but ghost.

"You're Severus Snape's ghost!"

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A young boy wouldn't have noticed, especially one about to burst with more emotions than he could name, but something flickered across the ghost's thin, pinched face.

"Ghost," the man breathed softly, the word lost in the rising joy and wonder.

"I can't believe I found you!" the boy said in a strained whisper, lifting his hands to his mouth, and his eyes wide. "Rose said that I'd never find a ghost down here, let alone you."

The ghost silently arched an eyebrow and glanced into the gloom beyond the boy and the door. "Rose is with you?" he asked.

"No," he answered unthinkingly as he regained his feet. "She's back at Hogwarts..." he said before muttering testily "... suffocating under a pile of books." His eye roll meant that he missed the quirk of the ghost's lips.

"And you are?" the ghost asked, but his tone suggested that the answer was suspected and not welcome.

"Albus Potter," Albus replied, a little unsure of himself now. The ghost made an odd, strangled sound and rubbed at its forehead. "I came here to find you."

"Whatever for!" he snapped out nastily, causing Albus to cringe back. "I've had enough of Potters to last a li—an afterlife!" He flung his arms wide and breathed heavily. Dust danced madly under the beaked nose. "Potters are worse than bad pennies."

"But..." he declared desperately. "But I came all this way... and—"

"And what?" Snape spat out. "I should stay and listen just because of that?"

"I... I..." he began nervously. "No, not really, no," he ended empty.

He hadn't thought about that when he'd planned this. It had all been about him and his dad; he'd never stopped to think about Severus Snape. His dad had spoken about burdens and regrets, but he'd never set out to lighten the load. Albus had seen it as that special sort of stupidity that adults had. If something could be made easier, why not make it easier? But now, when the ghost was trembling with rage and sneering at him, he thought he knew why. Firstly, Severus Snape was one hell of a scary ghost; secondly, just maybe his dad had known that Severus Snape would not have appreciated any gesture from the Potter family, even if it was an apology and a thank you. It seemed that making things right sometimes just made things worse. He gulped and felt his emotions disintegrate in the crucible of real life.

"You should go back to Hogwarts and leave things alone, especially things that you know nothing about," the ghost said firmly.

"But I do know!" Albus replied petulantly. And he did in a fashion. His dad had told him the same stories over and over. Albus knew his brother and sister hadn't heard the stories; it seemed that, for some reason, his dad thought he ought to know.

"Just as bad as your father!" he ground out through clenched teeth.

"I didn't come here to fight," the boy said simply. "I came here to see if I could help my dad." The ghost looked discomforted and fidgeted. He suddenly seemed wrong-footed, just as Albus had felt when told to leave rather than having to escape.

"What's wrong with your... dad?" he asked after an uncomfortable pause.

"Usual," he answered with a shrug. "Mum says that it's to do with..." and here he paused, scrunching up his face, to recall the correct terminology "... pigheadedness."

"Really?" asked the ghost amusedly.

Albus nodded. "My mum says that Dad should pull the rod out of his ar—"

"I get the idea," Snape interrupted.

Albus flushed, and a nervous laugh exploded from his mouth. "Sorry."

"Not at all," the ghost muttered with a strange smile. "If time wasn't so pressing, I'd ask you to elaborate, but it is, so you should toddle back to Hogwarts. People will no doubt be looking for you."

"No one knows I'm gone!" he said with a mix of defiance and alarm.

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Trust me, Potter," he uttered snidely. "The teachers know you're gone."

"Oh," he mouthed. "I didn't know they'd know that."

"It's how we kept your father alive during his stay," Snape responded flatly.

Albus looked up sharply. "You kept him alive," he said with passionate conviction.

"As much as I would like to have Harry Potter owe me a life debt, it simply isn't the case." He licked his lips and glanced away. "A great many people helped him stay alive... and some of them died for it," he finished bitterly, his upper lip twisting.

"I... I want to say thank you. I want to thank you."

"Beg pardon?"

"My dad says that your death was... was.... It wasn't fair," Albus said with a sigh, acknowledging that he couldn't say exactly what he felt. He didn't have the words.

The ghost laughed ruefully. "Fair? I'd have thought he would have figured out that life isn't fair a long time ago."

"I think he did," Albus persisted, his green eyes shimmering. "That's why he still calls you a basta—"

"I get that, too," Snape said curtly. "Do you eavesdrop on your parents, by any chance?"

"No..." and at the look on the ghost's face, he blushed "... I'm just good at listening."

"A trait no doubt inherited from your mother."

"No," Albus contradicted gently. "My dad is the listener; he listens to everything." His glistening forehead furrowed, and he looked pained as he gathered some complicated concepts into order. "I think he's afraid of missing something."

They stared at each other for several moments. Albus couldn't think clearly. It was as though that one thought had been so large his head couldn't handle any more thoughts. Even the ghost seemed thoughtful.

"I suspect I know what's wrong with Pot—your dad," the ghost muttered softly. "You can't help him with this."

He knew there had been no guarantees, but to hear the words was crushing nonetheless. It made him feel utterly useless. His mum and dad always said that saying sorry and showing thanks for someone else's efforts and pains were the best things to do. This is why adults had that special kind of stupidity. They never followed their own advice. Whatever he had hoped to gather wasn't here.

"I thought I could say what he wanted to say and it'd be alright," he mumbled mournfully.

"How so?" Snape said, not unkindly.

"I'd say sorry and thank you, and then you'd say something that I could pass on, and then Dad would feel better."

"I doubt that I'd feel... comfortable telling you, an eleven-year-old, what I'd say to your father," he said tonelessly. "But," he continued gently, "you didn't come just for your dad, did you?"

Albus jolted and looked away, fixing his eyes on the ghost's collar. Dad had warned him that Snape could see things you didn't want him to see. How silly to have forgotten.

"I don't know," he answered as honestly as he could.

The ghost just nodded, giving him another of those analytical stares. "When you know the answer to my question, then you'll be better able to help your dad."

Albus inhaled and sulked. "I knew this would be complicated," he griped, scuffing his shoe across the dusty floor.

After making a few streaks in the dust, he looked up quizzically. "My mum and dad both say that you were mean and horrible."

Snape snorted and raised an eyebrow. "I was... to them."

"What about now?" he asked innocently.

The ghost smirked. "Your dad still calls me a bastard; what do you think?"

A snigger burst past Albus' tense lips. And as he was old enough to recognise a rhetorical question, he didn't bother to make an excuse. Somehow, he felt pleased with himself. He couldn't say for sure why, but the disappointment that had crushed him didn't seem so bad now. It was like he'd searched for a Chocolate Frog Card and found the actual wizard.

"You've been nice to me," he offered, instead.

"Your point?"

"Dunno," he said, with a shrug that was far too nonchalant.

"You've got all you're getting," Snape assured firmly. "Go back to bed, Potter."

Albus opened his mouth to argue, but saw the edge in Snape's eye and thought better of it. He knew deep down that he'd done and got all he could.

"Can I come back?"

The ghost looked shocked, but the expression was quickly caught and tamed. "No."

"Why?"

"Because, and I speak from experience, there is no gain in fruitless endeavours."

"Can I come back when I can answer your question?"

The compressed lips parted quickly as if to issue another refusal, but before the word could slip out, the ghost frowned, narrowing his eyes. "Yes. I'd find your answer interesting."

Albus beamed, flashing immaculate white teeth. "Thank you, sir."

"Now, as your former Head of House, I order you back to Hogwarts."