

Night of Secrets

by Raira

Harry, roaming Hogwarts at night, runs into the last person he expects to see.

This fic takes place during Order of the Phoenix, shortly after the Weasley twins have left Hogwarts. It was written for the LJ 30minutefics fic exchange

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Footsteps in the Corridor

Chapter 1 of 9

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BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

Any student found in possession of devices which may be used to flaunt the school rules, or which may be used to interfere with the duties of the Hogwarts High Inquisitor will be summarily expelled from the school and will receive a lifetime ban on their use of magic. Such devices include unauthorised Portkeys, Invisibility Cloaks, Metamorph-Medals and any products sold by "Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes". For a complete list, see the notice posted outside the High Inquisitor's office. All such devices should be handed in personally to the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Thirty.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor and Hogwarts Headmistress

There was no way Harry was going to give that old toad his father's invisibility cloak, and he was sure that Umbridge would soon find some pretext for searching the dormitories. The night the decree was posted, he waited until everyone was asleep, then slipped out of bed and pulled it out of his trunk. Quietly, so as not to disturb his fellow fifth years, he snuck out the door of his dorm room, swinging the cloak around him as he walked. He'd hide it under the statue of the humpbacked witch in the third floor corridor. As far as he knew, only Fred, George, Ron, Hermione and Snape knew about that passage, and whilst he wouldn't put it past Snape to steal his cloak again, the Potions professor would have to know where to look for it. It wasn't an ideal solution, but it was the best one he could come up with right then.

As he snuck down the stairs to the common room, another thought occurred to him. Once he had stashed the Invisibility Cloak, he'd have to come up with some way to sneak back to bed unobserved. He paused at the foot of the staircase. Well, he'd have to work that part out when he came to it.

He eased open the door in the portrait hole. The Fat Lady was snoring loudly. He stepped carefully through the opening and gently pulled the portrait shut. At the last moment, his fingers slipped. The frame banged against the wall, and the Fat Lady woke up with a start.

"Who's there?" she grumbled sleepily. "Go away. I'm trying to sleep. Students aren't allowed out of bed after hours."

Harry didn't answer her. He stood frozen in place as she opened her eyes sleepily and looked around. Covered by his Invisibility Cloak, and completely silent, there was no evidence that he was there at all. "Must've been dreaming," she mumbled, allowing her eyes to drift closed.

It was only after her snores began again that Harry dared to tiptoe past her and down the stairs. The faint sound of his footsteps seemed to echo loudly in the silence of the darkened castle. He slowed his pace, making every step careful and deliberate, in an attempt to muffle the sound.

It didn't seem to make any difference. As Harry descended towards the third floor corridor, the sound of his footsteps seemed to be, if anything, getting louder. He paused, his feet on the edge of a step. Suddenly, the staircase jerked. Wildly he grabbed onto the banister and only just managed to stop himself tumbling down the staircase as it shifted its position.

It wasn't until the crunching, grinding sound of the staircase settling into its new position had stopped that Harry realised that whilst he himself wasn't moving, he could still hear the sound of feet on flagstone. As he stood there, motionless, it seemed to him that there were far too many footsteps to belong to a single person. On an impulse, he turned, and headed down towards the sound. He could always return to the third floor corridor and the statue of the humpbacked witch later.

Pitter-pitter-pitter-patter. It sounded almost as if three or four house-elves were scurrying down towards the dungeons. If they were patrolling, Umbridge and her Inquisitional Squad would never notice Harry's quiet movement over that din. He crept down the stairs as quickly as he dared. The house-elves, or whoever was making the noise, stopped. Harry picked up his own pace, hoping to make up some distance.

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the stone staircase leading to the dungeon level, the sound of footsteps still hadn't returned. Harry squinted into the dim light produced by the dwindling torches located at even intervals along the walls. Why would a bunch of house-elves be heading into the dungeons? He had just taken a step forward to investigate, when he saw movement ahead. Quickly, he ducked into the nearest dungeon and tugged the door behind him. Its creak sounded unnaturally loud in the silent castle, and although the door didn't quite close, Harry had no intention of drawing attention to himself by making another attempt.

The room was chilly. A draught played with the hem of the Invisibility Cloak. Harry clutched it around him, glad that the torches in here had all but sputtered out. If the cloak *did* flutter above his ankles, he'd only show up as another shadow in the dungeon. He squinted in the blackness, trying to distinguish a path amongst the faint outlines of desks and chairs.

He didn't see the strange shadow on the floor until just before he tripped over it. Only his wildly flung-out arm catching the edge of a desk saved him from clattering to the ground. His foot slipped onto the thing on the floor, and it yelped. Harry cried out too, backing up hastily against the desk. The edge of his cloak caught under his foot, and it was dragged right off him.

Before he had time to do more than scramble away from the source of the noise, the shadow moved. *Something* leapt up onto the desk, and Harry could just make out the reflection of two eyes, and a set of glistening, yellowed, extremely sharp-looking teeth loomed closer and closer to his neck. The creature growled low in the back of its throat. Harry found himself backed up further and further until he was pressed right up against the wall.

"Students in the corridors, my dear?"

At this point, Harry wasn't sure if the sound of Filch's shuffling footsteps in the hallway was a welcome one or not. True, Filch was far less likely to kill him than the monster that was silently advancing on him, but there wasn't anyone he could think of that he'd like less to be rescued by; especially with the new powers Umbridge had conferred upon the caretaker.

Filch's torch shone through the crack in the door, momentarily lighting up the room. There was no hope of the man spotting him; Harry's retreat had put him well out of sight of anyone outside. He only had a fraction of a second to register the huge black dog that was almost upon him before they were once again plunged into darkness. Screwing his eyes shut, he cursed the loss of his night vision, and wished fervently that he had time to reach his wand before the beast finished him off. Steeling himself for an attack, Harry threw his hands up in front of his face.

There was a faint popping noise, and, instead of sharp teeth sinking into his neck, he felt himself being seized by human hands. One held him tightly against what felt like a man's chest, the other covered his mouth. Panicked, Harry bit down on the soft flesh, and was rewarded by a soft curse.

"Harry, it's me, Sirius!" a voice hissed in his ear. "Quiet, or we'll both be caught!"

In the distance, they could hear the sound of Filch's footsteps retreating "They'll be stealing potions ingredients," the caretaker wheezed. "Professor Snape will be very pleased to discover who has been thieving from his stores again."

"I'm going to let you go," Sirius whispered. "You'd better get that cloak back on before they check in here."

Harry whispered a quiet affirmative, and as soon as Sirius released him, he squatted down, patting at the floor until his fingers found his cloak. His night vision still had not returned.

"What about you?" he hissed to Sirius.

"Filch won't find me," Sirius chuckled. "I'm quicker than he is." As Harry was about to protest, he added, "Even if he ~~sees~~ sees me, he's not going to recognise a big black dog as Sirius Black!"

Harry wasn't about to let his godfather run off now, not when he'd only just met up with him. "Snuffles will fit under the cloak with me," he insisted. "That way you won't *have* to run. Sirius, I'm so glad you came, I..."

"Shh," Sirius reminded him. "Fine, I'll transform again then." Harry could hear the smile in his voice as he added, "Your father and I used to hide under this cloak all the time."

A warm feeling stole through Harry. Despite the danger, despite the terrible risk to his godfather, he was *glad* Sirius was here. There was the characteristic faint popping sound of Sirius transforming, and then the big black dog wound itself around his legs.

As the sound of Filch's footsteps became louder, and the crack of faint light in the door became brighter and brighter, Harry fumbled to rearrange his Invisibility Cloak around the two of them. He was just in time. The door creaked open, and Filch shuffled in, Mrs. Norris at his heels.

Filch held his torch up high, glaring around the dungeon. "Stinking students, always breaking rules. I'll catch them this time, won't I, my darling? I've been waiting for someone to try my new whip out on. Oh yes, they'll regret their little evening stroll."

Harry stood stock still. Even Snuffles barely quivered as Mrs Norris prowled around the dungeon: leaping up on to tables, threading through the legs of chairs, and squeezing through impossibly small gaps.

"They've got to be here," Filch wheezed, narrowing his pale eyes as he took in the room. "We've searched all the other dungeons."

"Do you hear me, you filthy little worms?" he yelled. "There's a freshly polished set of chains and manacles all ready for you in my office. Come out, or it'll be the worse for

you!"

Harry couldn't think of a less tempting invitation. Involuntarily, he shivered as Mrs. Norris turned her head, and her lamp-like eyes appeared to bore right into him. She seemed to pause like that for an interminable length of time, and Harry was almost certain that this time she'd been able to spot them through the cloak; but then her head whipped around in the opposite direction, and she padded past them, passing so close to Sirius that she almost touched him.

Suddenly, from somewhere up above, there was a loud crash and the sound of glass shattering.

"PEEVES!" Filch yelled furiously, shuffling out of the room as fast as he could. Mrs. Norris streaked ahead of him, already on the case.

Harry stifled a nervous giggle. "Peeves is certainly taking Fred and George's suggestion seriously," he mused quietly.

Snuffles looked up at him quizzically.

"I'll explain later," Harry whispered.

Snuffles slipped out from under the Invisibility Cloak and stuck his head out of the door. Harry held his breath in nervous agony in case Filch hadn't yet disappeared from sight. He wished his godfather wasn't so blithe about the risks he took. If Harry were caught out of bed, he might be expelled. On the other hand, if Professor Umbridge ever discovered that Sirius was in the castle, he risked imprisonment, perhaps even death. Harry couldn't bear the thought of losing the closest thing to a father he'd ever had.

Snuffles seemed to be completely unconcerned. He wagged his tail to indicate that the coast was clear and then crept out into the corridor. Harry followed, his cloak still clasped tightly around him, hoping fervently that the commotion Peeves was causing would muffle the sound of Sirius's feet on the stone. After all, *Harry* had been curious enough to investigate that noise.

Rather than heading up the staircase towards the Gryffindor common room, Sirius turned back down the cold passageway leading to the rest of the dungeons. As silently as he could, Harry followed him. It was only now that the threat of discovery was past that he had leisure to wonder why Sirius was down here at all. He'd just automatically assumed that his godfather had come to visit him. However, as they journeyed further through the cold half-light, it became more and more apparent that Sirius had something else on his mind.

They halted outside Professor Snape's office, and, once again, Sirius transformed.

"I'm sorry for frightening you earlier, Harry," he whispered. "If you'd stayed where you were a moment longer, Filch would have caught you."

"That's all right, Sirius," Harry muttered, trying not to relive the fear of those sharp teeth sinking into his flesh.

"You need to go now," Sirius continued. "You're in enough trouble as it is, and I need to talk to Snape."

"But I wanted to see you!" Harry protested.

"Harry, I didn't expect to see you tonight," Sirius said, "But I'm glad I did. I've missed you. You can't afford to be discovered here, not now Dolores Umbridge has taken over the school. Go back to bed. We'll see each other again soon."

A cold feeling stole through Harry's heart. Sirius had taken this risk to see *Snape*? Snape, who could visit the Order's headquarters any time he chose, whilst Harry was cooped up here where even the fires were watched?

Sirius must have read something in his face because he reached out and patted Harry's arm. "It's been good to see you, Harry," he said. "Now go back to bed, and make sure you keep yourself hidden in that cloak. Filch and Mrs Norris are still about. I'll contact you as soon as I can."

"Sure, Sirius," Harry muttered, injecting those words with as much hurt and reproach as he could.

Sirius patted him once more on the arm and smiled. "I'll contact you as soon as I can," he repeated. Without knocking, he opened the door to Snape's office and disappeared inside.

Harry glared at the door. It didn't help at all that the recent danger had lent a light to his godfather's eyes and a spring to his step that Harry hadn't seen for a long time. He, Harry, had been sent back to his bed like some irritating child. Angrily, he vented his feelings by kicking the wall beside the door. It didn't make him feel better. All it meant was that now he had to limp back to his bed and try to sleep with his toes aching.

As he headed back up the stairs, Harry couldn't help but muse on what his godfather's business was with Snape. What could be so important that he risked his life by returning to Hogwarts?

A Class Reunion

Chapter 2 of 9

Severus Snape, working late, is visited by the very last person he wants to see.

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Sleep had its merits, but Severus Snape had had such a frustrating day, he'd decided to stay up and work on a new potion he was formulating. Most of the other teachers would have read a good book, he supposed, or confided their troubles to one another, but he found the careful but repetitive work of preparing ingredients soothing, and the complicated concepts he was combining required enough of his attention to distract him from what was really bothering him.

Of course, quite often he found himself far too stressed to sleep. His double-agent role between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord was a delicate tap-dance of subtlety, and his success in keeping both of them convinced of his loyalty was only maintained by constant vigilance. Suspicions abounded on both sides, but whilst the leaders trusted

him and oh, how skilled he had been to obtain the confidence of them both the underlings were welcome to doubt him. He had never needed nor wanted their good will.

Setting aside the more pressing concerns of his life right then after all, his role in this new wizard war wouldn't be resolved that night Snape allowed himself to dwell on one of the more irritating aspects of his job, the impending OWL exams. Normally, Slytherin performed quite acceptably. One couldn't expect to equal Ravenclaw's achievements, after all, since the members of Flitwick's house were chosen on their academic merit, but Severus was accustomed to his house not putting him to shame.

Enter Vincent Crabbe, and Gregory Goyle, possibly the stupidest boys that ever managed to get their shoes on the right feet in the mornings. Severus would never have admitted it to anyone else, but even that near-squib, Neville Longbottom, was looking likely to get more OWLs than Malfoy's sidekicks. Judging from the quality of the work he'd been receiving from them lately, he wouldn't put it past those two dunderheads to receive the lowest marks ever recorded in the exams. Perhaps they'd even go into negative figures.

The two of them were unlikely to do anything to improve their performance, either. They certainly weren't interested in studying. He'd hoped Malfoy might have some influence with them, but that young man seemed far too interested in his new role as the Headmistress's lackey to pay any attention to the advice of his Head of House. The boys themselves were equally uncooperative. Earlier that evening, he'd summoned them to that very room in an attempt to impress upon them the weight of the exams they were about to sit.

"What's the point?" Goyle had shrugged insouciantly. "We don't need to do well in exams."

"Yeah," Crabbe had agreed, sneering. Malfoy's new attitude was having a bad influence on these two. "We don't want to work for the Ministry, you know."

"We'll be Death Eaters like our fathers," Goyle had chimed in. "So who cares?"

Normally, looming was something Snape reserved for his Gryffindor students, but right at that point, some intimidation had seemed to be in order. He had leaned right over the table, gripping the edge tightly with his fingers, and glared at the two boys, pausing long enough for the depth of his displeasure to sink into their thick skulls. "You're probably right," he had conceded. "The Dark Lord, I'm sure, has a use for more fools with muscles where their brains should be."

At these words, Crabbe had nudged Goyle triumphantly. They'd both looked pleased with themselves.

"The Death Eaters have a word for followers like that," Snape had continued smoothly, making eye contact first with one boy, then the other. "Do you want to know what it is?"

"What?" Goyle had demanded. "Bodyguards?"

Severus had allowed himself a snort of laughter. "No, you fool. As if the Dark Lord requires *your* protection! They call them 'cannon fodder'. A cannon is a Muggle device which explodes heavy balls out through a long cylinder to smash their enemies from long distances away."

The idiots had high-fived each other, chortling.

"So," Snape had continued, "'Cannon fodder' refers to troops which are expendable, thrown in front of such devices and left to take their chances. Their lives are simply not worth preserving. Most will die."

He had taken advantage of Crabbe and Goyle's shocked looks to press his point. "Most cannon fodder, of course, is far too stupid to understand the meaning of the term. If you fools don't learn to wield magic with some degree of competence, then do not expect the Dark Lord to value your worth to him. He will not protect you. He will have no pity on you. Compassion is just a three-syllable word to him. He will feed you to his enemies until you are killed, and he will not spare a thought for your death."

The boys had looked stupider than ever as they had gaped at him. What a shame that they hadn't been sorted into Hufflepuff, like most of the dregs of the student body were. It would have saved Severus the tedium of interviews such as this.

"Now get out of my sight," Snape had snarled, "and, if you value your lives, open a book before the exams. Surprise me! Read it!"

Reflecting back on that conversation, Snape mused that if his predictions of their death came true, Crabbe and Goyle would be no loss to the world. However, he wasn't going to allow even those fools the chance to make Severus Snape look incompetent.

His musings were forcibly interrupted by what sounded like a chandelier smashing in one of the upper stories. Really, how tiresome. Peeves really should get himself a new trick. Snape didn't especially object to the torture of either Filch or that Umbridge woman, but the poltergeist had no finesse. What's more, the sudden noise had interrupted his concentration, and his hand had slipped. The daisy roots he'd been systematically shredding were now crushed into a complete mess. He'd have to completely start this batch over. A quick scouring charm sufficed to clean it up, but as he fetched another bunch of roots, Snape entertained himself by contemplating in great detail just what he'd like to do to Peeves.

He'd just gotten himself set up for a second attempt, when his door opened, scraping horribly along the floor like fingernails across a blackboard. Irritably, he looked up, ready to give the intruder a piece of his mind. His scowl deepened when he realised just who had decided to pay him a visit at this hour of the night. Sirius Black was possibly the last person he wished to set eyes on at any time. Still, Severus had the peace of mind not to allow the man to see how much his presence rattled him. Instead, he relaxed the frown, settling his expression into an unconcerned sneer.

"So, Black, you've finally developed enough of a backbone to leave home," he said, allowing his voice to drip with vitriol. "Forgive me if I'm not so overcome with the joy of your presence that I embrace you, won't you?"

"I'd actually rather you *didn't* touch me," Sirius growled, shutting the door behind him. Both of them winced at the noise it made. "I've just bathed, you see."

"I wish I could say that this appearance of yours was a pleasure," Severus sneered, attempting to ignore the jibe. It took a supreme force of will to suppress the urge to push his greasy hair back from his face. "But although you have nothing better to do but cower behind the skirts of others in the Order, I have several pressing matters requiring my attention. I trust you'll make this brief, and then leave."

As he saw the anger dawn on the other man's face, Severus wished fervently that he'd realised whilst he was still at school how easy it was to rile up Sirius Black. Life back then would have been so much sweeter. Of course, then, Black had always had Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew to back him up, but there would have been opportunities! Snape would have made sure there would have been.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," Sirius snapped, his face red with suppressed anger. "I'll get right to the point. You've stopped Harry's Occlumency lessons."

"Yes," Severus responded through gritted teeth. "Is that all you came to say? The way I choose to teach my students really isn't any of your concern, is it?"

"Harry is my godson," Sirius responded sharply, his eyes glinting steel at the potions master. *Everything* that concerns his welfare is my concern. You know better than anyone else just how important those lessons are."

"Perhaps you might explain that to your thick-headed godson!" Snape thundered. "He makes no effort with his lessons. I've stressed over and over again the importance of practice, but he stubbornly refuses to even *try*. He's rude and insolent, and wastes all our time with his conceit. The idea that someone should know better than the great Harry Potter! He *courts* those dreams! His arrogance threatens us all!"

"Listen to me, *Snivellus!*" Sirius snapped angrily. "I *know* why Harry's lessons were stopped, and it had nothing to do with whether he practiced or not! You couldn't stand a student finding out what a greasy little git you were at school, could you? You were ashamed that he discovered just how easily James overpowered you. Harry isn't the

arrogant one here, it's you!"

Snape's wand was out before he had time to think about it. "You think you're ever so clever, don't you? I would have thought that a life of cowardly skulking would have taught you some humility, but it seems I am mistaken. As far as I'm concerned, it was quite a salutary experience for Potter to see his father's true colours. He had some stupid noble ideas about the wonderful, kind man his father was. Well, at least he isn't under *that* illusion any more."

Sirius's wand flashed out every bit as quickly as Severus's had. "James was three times the man you are," he snarled. "We all made mistakes back then, but at least James had the sense to grow up! You're still the spiteful, nasty coward that you always were. Only you, Snape, would be low enough to disillusion an orphan who never knew his parents."

"Potter should not go sneaking in where he's not wanted!" Snape snapped. "He's a troublemaker just like his father was and every bit as devious."

"You left that memory where he could see it, though, didn't you?" Sirius roared. Pointing his wand right at Snape, he snapped, "Admit it! You did it on purpose!"

Snape didn't bother to reply. He just fixed Sirius with a disdainful smirk and allowed the man to draw his own conclusions.

Sirius snapped. He yelled out an incantation and hurled a hex at Snape. The Potions master barely had time to duck before the spell hit one of the glass jars behind him and shattered it. Tiny shards of glass, smelly green liquid, and the embalmed body parts of one of Snape's many preserved creatures rained down upon them.

Neither of them bothered with the niceties of duelling. They just began hurling jinxes, hexes and curses at one another in rapid succession. The room echoed with explosions, crashes, and the occasional expletive.

Snape sent a nasty Conjunctivitis Curse hurling towards Sirius, who blocked it with almost insolent ease, responding with an Insect Jinx, which Snape only narrowly avoided.

Snape's Jelly-legs Jinx caught Sirius just as he was about to hurl his next spell, and the resulting wobbliness of his legs was almost his undoing as the Potions master attempted to press his advantage. Somehow, he managed to duck and weave, and avoid Snape's spells, until he managed to yell, "*Finite!*" and his legs worked as they should once more.

Sirius growled at the Potions master, baring his teeth.

"It's no surprise your animagus form is canine," Snape sneered, pausing to catch his breath. "You're more than half animal yourself. Did the ever so pure Walburga Black deign to lie with a dog, then?"

Quite opposite to what Snape had expected, Sirius threw back his head and laughed. "Insulting my mother, Snivellus? How childish of you. Of course, if she ~~had~~ slept with an animal, it would have been a vast improvement over her usual tastes."

With that, Sirius swung back into action. "*Engorgio!*" he yelled, his wand pointed right at Snape's face.

This time, it was the Potions master who dodged about trying to avoid spells whilst he dealt with the damage done to his own body. His already large nose was swelling rapidly. He ducked behind his desk, halting the spell before his nose became bigger than a tomato.

Snape didn't immediately get an opportunity to shrink his nose however. A well-placed Reductor Curse from Sirius blasted his desk into shards of wood the size of matchsticks, the neatly piled daisy roots on its surface pelting both of them like hailstones, and the knife he'd used to cut them hurling across the room to sink, quivering, into the wall. Howling furiously, Severus hurled a Stinging Hex at the other wizard's hand, barking out a laugh as Sirius dropped his wand.

"Well, now isn't *this* interesting?" Snape mused. His wand was extended in front of him. Slowly, savouring every moment, he advanced upon the disarmed wizard. "Oh, no, I hardly think so," he chided as Sirius dived for his wand. "*Incarcerous!*" he drawled with a negligent flick of his own. Thick ropes appeared from nowhere and bound his opponent tightly. Sirius, mid-leap, crumpled to the floor.

"The fugitive, Sirius Black, in my power," Snape sneered, nudging Sirius with his foot. "And to think, with one message to the Headmistress, I could end your career forever! Oh wait, I forgot." He didn't even bother to try and keep the smirk off his face. "You don't actually *do* anything, do you?" Smirking, he studied his captive in a leisurely fashion whilst he casually restored his nose to its original size.

"You haven't changed," Sirius snapped, struggling furiously against his bonds. "You still retreat to the most cowardly attacks. Release me, give me back my wand, and face me like a man!"

"When I have already defeated you?" Snape snorted. "I don't think so, Black, I've waited too long for this moment." He permitted himself to deliver a good kick to Sirius's ribs, smirking with satisfaction at the groan of pain he elicited. "*That*, Black, was for just plain existing. I seem to recall you punishing me for the very same crime when we were both students here. Now. . . what would be the most amusing way to dispose of you?"

Pointing his wand at Sirius, Severus levitated his victim, turning him until his body was once again upright and floating a few inches off the floor. "I'd find it most satisfactory to do it myself," he hissed. "Oh yes. Dumbledore might have a soft spot for you, Black, but there's a new order in Hogwarts now, and Dolores Umbridge would be most delighted, I'm sure, if I finished you off."

"If you expect me to beg for my life, you're going to be very disappointed." Pain was evident in Sirius's voice, but he glared right at Snape, the eye-contact never wavering. "I have no intention of amusing you."

"You're amusing me already," Snape informed him, smirking. He smashed his fist into Black's face, watching with amusement as the force of the blow knocked the helpless man back against the wall. Magic was a formidable weapon, but sometimes there was nothing as satisfying as a physical attack on an enemy, even if it did leave his hand aching. To his disappointment, Black refused to make any more sound than the first gasp of pained surprise.

The room had descended into near-silence. The sounds of the systematic destruction of Snape's office were replaced by the tinkling sound of tiny shards of glass settling on the stone floor. Glass jars lay shattered everywhere. Snape's desk was history. A faint purple haze was forming in the dim, sputtering light coming from the torches on the walls. The acrid scent of preservative fluid mixed horribly with the heavy perfume of floral nectar.

Snape raised his wand to finish their lifelong feud. Sirius stared right into his eyes, neither flinching nor looking away.

Peeves to the Rescue

Chapter 3 of 9

Minerva McGonagall, too, cannot sleep. She uncovers her own mystery and is drawn into the events that Snape's visitor has begun.

This fic takes place during Order of the Phoenix, shortly after the Weasley twins have left Hogwarts. It was written for the LJ 30minutefics fic exchange.

Professor McGonagall had been woken from a fitful slumber by the crash from Peeves's latest escapade. Sleep was an elusive thing now that Professor Dumbledore had left Hogwarts, and in an effort to wear the wakefulness out of herself, she'd decided to take a walk around the less travelled areas of the castle. Her path was carefully calculated to avoid any possibility of meeting up with the new Headmistress. Let that horrible woman sort the poltergeist out for herself. *She* had no intention of assisting.

As she meandered around the corridors, Minerva pondered the current state of the school. She missed Albus. The man could be insufferable at times, and she could have happily wiped that serene smile from his face on more than one occasion, but the place seemed empty without him. He was a fair-minded and generous man and, on the whole, an excellent Headmaster. Perhaps he was a little too soft-hearted with the students, but that was an easy fault to overlook.

Dolores Umbridge was a very poor exchange for him. Minerva had loathed the woman from the first moment she'd set eyes on her, and further acquaintance with the woman only served to confirm her initial impression. Small-minded and vindictive, it seemed that Professor Umbridge's only interests in life were to gain as much power as she could for herself and to turn the students (if not the teachers as well) into mindless tools of the Ministry.

To Minerva's great satisfaction, the student body had had other ideas. Harry Potter had been one of the forerunners of the student rebellion. He'd spoken out in front of his class when Dolores had begun her ridiculous 'carefully structured, theory-centred, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic'. At the time, Minerva had had to reluctantly reprimand him, but she'd been delighted to discover that as time went on, neither he nor the other students had allowed that evil woman to stop them learning to combat the Dark Arts and had in fact decided to teach themselves! If it hadn't meant exposing them to Dolores's scrutiny and risking a mass expulsion, she would have awarded them fifty points each for their house for such a courageous and effectual solution.

It was a shame that she hadn't found out about it earlier, though. She could have helped protect them from discovery. The Room of Requirement (yet another of the castle's many secrets would she ever learn them all?) was an inspired choice of venue for their sessions, and Minerva had to admire the students' ingenuity, but under her protection, they would have stood a much better chance of remaining undetected. Then, maybe, Albus would still be here and the school would be functioning as it should. She missed him.

Still, it entertained Minerva to muse on what a hollow victory Umbridge had won. She and the Minister had hoped to imprison Albus and he'd easily eluded them. They'd hoped to have the school completely under their control, and it was in chaos. The only students who complied with their directions were the members of that hateful Inquisitional Squad, and even *that* victory was a hollow one. Those students had no loyalty to either the Headmistress or the Ministry. Dolores would discover in good time that they would always support the winning side and would desert her the moment the tide turned against her.

Of course, Umbridge's life would have been tolerable if it hadn't been for Fred and George Weasley. For the first time since they'd come to Hogwarts, Minerva was proud that those boys had been sorted into her house. What a precedence they had set! Their leadership had concreted the foundation for the student revolt, and their inventions were rapidly becoming the new Head's undoing. How fortunate that they had not only set off that commotion before they left, but sold so many products to the rest of the students. Their fine example was being almost universally adopted. Minerva wiped a tear from her eye. She'd never thought she'd miss those two; but really, they were talented wizards. What a shame they hadn't applied themselves to their schoolwork more. They could have earned themselves some pretty decent NEWTs in charms if they had stayed.

Minerva wasn't in any hurry to get anywhere in particular. She studiously avoided the sounds of Umbridge and Filch shouting at Peeves, but other than that, she was perfectly content to let her feet dictate her direction. By this time of night, the stench from the Stink Pellets and Dungbombs the students had dropped in the corridor had dissipated to a mildly unpleasant aroma, and the unaccustomed solitude made her journey through it almost pleasurable.

The sound was soft, furtive, and for a moment Minerva wasn't sure that she hadn't been imagining it. Frowning a little, she paused, stilling her breathing in an effort to hear better. There it was again. It sounded like someone creeping through the hallway; someone even more intent on concealing their presence than she herself was a student, most likely. She frowned. Whilst she minded not a whit that the students were upsetting the order Umbridge was trying so desperately to create, they needed their sleep. There were exams coming up, after all. Not only that, but their best chance of surviving the war ahead lay in them learning as much as possible before they were called upon to use their knowledge and for that they needed to be alert. The Ministry might have their heads in the sand, but Minerva knew that not even children were safe from Lord Voldemort.

As quietly as she could, Minerva headed off in pursuit. Whoever was making the noise sounded close, but when she rounded the corner, the corridor appeared to be completely empty, and there was nowhere else a fugitive could have gone. Frowning, she shook her head, wondering if she were imagining things. Flights of fancy weren't something she was usually susceptible to, but perhaps the unaccustomed silence of the castle relative silence anyway, Filch and Umbridge's distant pursuit of Peeves didn't really count was playing tricks on her mind. For several minutes she stood unmoving, listening for movement. Nothing.

It was only after she'd wandered down another corridor and had paused to admire the detail of one of the paintings on the wall that the sound began once again. It appeared to be coming from the very area she had been searching. It was someone invisible then. This time, Minerva gave the footsteps a good head start and followed their sound as quietly as she could. Every time she reached a bend in her path, she halted, giving the unseen individual ample time to become complacent before she followed.

Whoever (or whatever) was making the sound was heading upwards, and Professor McGonagall gave them a wide berth on the stairway where her presence would be easily discovered. Often she had to slip so far back that she had to strain to hear the sound before she could follow the trail once more.

When she reached the third floor, Minerva was just in time to catch a flash of movement. Harry Potter's form appeared out of thin air. He glanced about furtively, bundled up the Invisibility Cloak which had concealed him and then pulled out his wand. Tapping the statue of the one-eyed witch, he whispered, "*Dissendium*". To Minerva's amazement, the statue's hump opened to reveal a hole.

Harry began to haul himself up to climb through the gap. Now that she had caught him, Minerva saw no need to continue hiding. Before he could vanish through the hole, she stepped out into the open. Summoning her severest frown, she called out repressively, "Harry Potter!"

Harry's expression registered horror, dread, and then, as he took in who had caught him, resignation mixed with relief. "Professor McGonagall," he said. "Uh, I was just..."

"Breaking half a dozen school rules," Minerva suggested, folding her arms.

"Well, yes, Professor," Harry admitted. Surreptitiously, he slipped the cloak behind his back in a belated attempt at concealment.

Minerva was insulted that he could imagine that such a transparent ruse might be enough to fool her. "You've been using an Invisibility Cloak, Potter," she pointed out sternly.

Sighing, the boy gave up the pretence and responded, "Yes, Professor. It was my father's. I didn't want Umbridge to get hold of it."

"*Professor* Umbridge," Minerva corrected. It was more of a reflex than any real concern for the lack of respect for the Headmistress.

"Professor Umbridge," Harry repeated dutifully.

Their eyes met. Had he been circumventing any other teacher's rules, Minerva would have instantly sent him to meet his punishment. However, under the circumstances, all her sympathy resided with the student. "Do you have many things to remind you of your family?" she asked, gentling her tone. It wasn't hard to be sympathetic to the poor boy's plight.

She had taken him by surprise. He glanced quickly up at her face, startled. Apparently he had expected punishment, not sympathy. "Just this," he mumbled. "And Hagrid I mean Professor Hagrid gave me an album with pictures of them in it, and..." he sighed, "I don't have anything else of theirs."

"I'll take care of that cloak for you," Minerva offered, holding out her hand. "There's no decree yet against teachers possessing them, and..." once again she fixed the fifth-year boy with a severe frown, "perhaps if I keep it, it will dissuade you from further rule breaking."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said gratefully. He handed it over, watching her fold it up neatly.

"Now I had better escort you back to the Gryffindor common room," Minerva decided. "Without this, you'll have a difficult time explaining yourself to the new Headmistress. There's no need to give her any opportunity to make your life difficult, is there Potter?"

Harry grinned at her. Suddenly, they were partners in crime. "No, Professor," he agreed.

They hadn't walked very far before Harry stopped, looking worried. Puzzled, Minerva halted her steps too. "Is something wrong, Potter?" she asked, allowing severity to creep back into her voice.

"It's just... Sirius is here tonight, Professor. If Umbridge catches him..."

"Professor Umbridge," Minerva corrected once again. Pursing her lips, she considered the options. "Where did he go?"

"He went into Sn-Professor Snape's office," Harry replied.

"Then Professor Snape will know if he succeeded in leaving undetected," Professor McGonagall decided. "I think we must delay your return to your dorm, Potter, whilst we investigate. I trust you will not interpret this as encouragement to be wandering around after hours?"

"No, Professor," Harry said quickly, gratitude plainly evident on his face.

"Very well. You'd better put this back on, then," Minerva said, handing Harry back his cloak. "I've no intention of drawing our new Headmistress's attention by having to explain your presence."

They hurried down the stairways, only slowing when the squat, mischievous form of Peeves flew over their heads, cackling.

"Hubble bubble boil and trouble!" he chanted. "Roll Umbridge's underwear in the rubble!"

The sound of pursuit could be clearly heard approaching rapidly from below. Filch and Umbridge were hurling threats as they attempted to gain on the poltergeist.

"Lead her upstairs, Peeves," Minerva suggested.

"Shan't!" Peeves sang.

"She's arranging for you to be expelled, Peeves," Minerva pointed out. "We can't have that, can we? Lead her upstairs and I'll make sure that never happens."

Peeves considered the Transfiguration professor. Then, smirking wickedly, he turned back the way he came and yelled at the top of his voice, "Exploding swamp in the corridor! Tonight only! Admission free!" He shot up towards the fifth floor.

"Well, dear me, that does sound very messy, doesn't it?" Minerva mused, hiding a smile. "I expect that will take quite some time to clean up, wouldn't you say, Potter?"

Harry's voice beside her sounded startled. "Yes, Professor," he stammered.

"Well then," Minerva continued, as the sounds of a furious Filch and Umbridge came closer, "I don't think we should hang around. After all, we'd get in the way of all their hard work."

Quickly, she stepped behind a statue. A moment later, the invisible Harry joined her, the telltale fluttering of her robes giving evidence of his approach.

An instant later, the Headmistress and caretaker ran past, their footsteps clunking along the stone floor as they attempted to head Peeves off.

"The fifth floor will be flooded!" Umbridge was yelling. "We'll need every teacher out of bed to help with the clean-up! Surely Dumbledore had a method of summoning them all at once! Find it, Filch, and use it!"

Minerva could hear Harry snickering softly beside her. "I hope it isn't a *magical* method," he whispered.

Once again, Minerva had to suppress a smile. She, too, was amused that Umbridge still hadn't discovered that Filch was a Squib.

"It must be in his office!" Filch panted. "And his office is..."

"Locked!" Umbridge finished the sentence for him. "Wait until the Ministry catches him! I'll get that secret out of him, and when I do, he'll be sorry he ever pitted his will against mine!"

"*Someone* will be sorry when they meet again, anyway," Minerva muttered, not the slightest bit concerned that Harry could hear her.

When Umbridge and Filch were safely out the way, Minerva stepped back out into the open. "Come on, Harry," she whispered. "We've got to go and warn your godfather to get out of the castle before it's too late."

Once again, they headed downstairs. Now that she knew that the Headmistress was otherwise occupied, Minerva didn't bother to try and conceal her movement. They were able to move much more quickly and soon found themselves in the dungeons.

"He's in here?" she asked Harry, pausing at the door to Snape's office. It was slightly ajar.

Harry pulled the cloak off himself. His hair, never tidy, was now sticking up all over his head. "That's where he was going when I left him," he said.

Minerva knocked at the door. There was no answer.

"He could have gone somewhere else," Harry suggested. "He sent me away before he found out if Professor Snape was in here."

Minerva knocked again. There was still no response.

"Perhaps we should check Professor Snape's quarters," she muttered, turning away.

Harry nudged at the door. "Maybe we should just have a look," he suggested. The door swung open with its customary ear-molesting creak.

"Harry Potter!" Minerva was shocked. "You don't just let yourself into a teacher's office without permis..."

Her voice trailed off as they both took in the scene. The room was in shambles: scorch marks singed the walls; potion ingredients were scattered around the room, some of them trampled; shards of glass littered the floor; a knife was buried in the wall; and the desk was a pile of rubble. It looked as though Peeves had let off an explosion there as practice for blowing up the swamp.

As if to underline that thought, a distant boom could be heard from upstairs.

"*What* happened here?" Minerva breathed, ignoring the sound. She and Harry stepped through the door and for the first time caught sight of what it had been hiding.

Sirius's face was covered in bruises and small flecks of blood. The man was bound by thick ropes and suspended just above the ground. He was breathing shallowly and appeared to be in pain.

"Sirius!" Harry's voice was anguished. He had seen his godfather first. He raced over, flinging his cloak aside and allowing it to crumple on the ground. Desperately, he began to tear at the ropes binding the man.

"Sirius, are you okay? Speak to me!" he pleaded. "What did he do to you?"

"Harry. I told you to go to bed," Sirius rasped weakly.

"He's here with me," Minerva said smoothly, reaching the pair, her wand at the ready. "Harry, stand back."

Two simple spells were sufficient to vanish the ropes and lower the man to the ground. "How badly are you hurt, Sirius?" she asked.

"Just a few bruises," Sirius whispered in a pained tone.

"What happened?" Minerva demanded, staring around the room.

"Things got a little heated between Snape and me," Sirius admitted reluctantly, prodding his ribs gingerly. "We duelled. He caught me off-guard."

"Where is he now?" Minerva demanded. When Sirius shook his head, she continued, "What possessed you to come here? You know Dolores Umbridge would like nothing better than to have you locked back up in Azkaban!"

"I won't skulk around like a coward," Sirius growled. "Harry needed me and I came."

Harry looked pained. "I wouldn't want you to get caught, Sirius," he said. Gently, he helped his godfather to his feet.

Minerva's gaze whipped over Sirius, assessing his injuries. "I can't do much for you," she muttered thoughtfully. "Most of this will have to heal itself, but I can help you feel better for a little while. Really, Sirius, what possessed you?"

"I did what needed to be done," Sirius said, clenching his teeth as Minerva tapped him gently with her wand. After a moment, his expression cleared, relief settling over his features.

"Duelling with Severus was foolish!" Minerva scolded. "If Dolores had been down here, if Peeves hadn't been destroying the castle, you would surely have been caught."

"That would hardly have been any loss to anyone," Snape's voice cut in. He was standing in the doorway, looking murderous. He stepped into the room, scowling at all three of its occupants, his gaze finally resting on Sirius. "So, Black, I see that once again your godson has come to your rescue. How does it feel to always be saved by a mere boy?"

"Snape!" Surprisingly fast, given his injuries, Sirius dived for a wand left in a cupboard in the corner.

Snape was quicker. He thrust out his own wand, barking out a spell, and a flash of green light streaked towards Sirius.

"No!" Harry yelled, diving in front of his godfather. Sirius whirled, trying to push Harry out of the way, but he was too slow. The spell hit Harry right in the chest. Intense pain contorted his face. He cried out in agony and collapsed at Sirius's feet.

"Severus, what have you done?" Minerva whispered, horror freezing her to the spot. She could not take her eyes off the limp form of her student crumpled on the ground.

Oh, My Godson

Chapter 4 of 9

Sirius is faced with a difficult decision. To help Harry he must put his trust in Snape.

Sirius dwelt on his memories of Harry's birth so often that it seemed to him that it had all just happened days before. He'd been on a date with Catriona Macnair, more to irritate the girl's parents than out of a real interest in her. Catriona came from a family which staunchly believed in blood purity, and Sirius, an outcast of the Black family, was not good enough for their daughter. The challenge was, of course, too much to resist, and it wasn't hard to charm the girl into defying her parents and spending a night with a blood traitor. Sirius was more than half-sure that her brother, Walden, was a Death Eater, and he was hoping that as an added bonus, he might glean some information to pass back to the Order.

He'd taken her to the best wizard restaurant in London. All the waiters had been wearing pristine, understated dress robes. They'd greeted the couple with the customary obsequious sneers and served them fancy gastronomic concoctions in portions so tiny, Sirius knew that he would have to eat again as soon as he escaped the fair lady's clutches. Catriona was playing the cool, disdainful pure-blood, and if Sirius was honest with himself, he'd been bored. Catriona was obviously enjoying going slumming, but she had about as much wit and intelligence as a Remembrall. The entertainment of deceiving her parents was well and truly wearing off, and he was even losing the desire to kiss her at the end of the date.

In an attempt to stop himself from laughing at the girl's inane comments, Sirius was gripping the tablecloth hard with one hand. The other was under the table, wielding a fork. He periodically poked the tines into his wrist to keep himself focussed on the conversation. This was really one of the worst dates he'd ever had.

Suddenly, there was a loud crack, and James appeared, his black hair even more untidy than usual. The music and the low murmur of conversation in the room stopped. As if they were all controlled by the same Imperius Curse, every waiter in the room turned and glared at them. There were no Anti-Apparition Jinxes on the restaurant, but it was clearly understood that some things were just *not done* in this place. The manager advanced on them, his expression thunderous. The head of every diner swivelled in their direction.

Without more than a passing glance at Catriona, and with no heed for the commotion he had caused in the rest of the restaurant, James grabbed Sirius's arm and hauled him to his feet. "It's happening!" he gasped. "Sirius, you've got to come with me. It's happening right now!"

Sirius was still gripping the tablecloth. As James pulled him up, it was dragged with him, and everything on it crashed towards Catriona. Red, green and brown sauces spattered all over her pure white gown. Wineglasses slid off the table and smashed on the floor at her feet, splashing red wine all over the delicate fabric of her shoes. Crockery shattered. Cutlery scattered everywhere.

"Siriuuuuuuus!" Catriona drew his name out in an outraged shriek. "How could you *do* this to me? My dress! My shoes!"

"Your hair!" Sirius finished for her, fishing a long piece of spaghetti out of her elegant coiffure. He grinned at her impudently, winked, and pressed his lips to her cold, sauce-stained cheek. "You *are* an awful mess, aren't you?"

James seemed too distracted for contrition. "It's happening *now*, Sirius!" he hissed urgently, ignoring Catriona.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Sirius grinned, emptying a pile of gold from his pockets onto the bare wood of the table. "I'm sure that will cover the bill. Use any left over to buy yourself a new dress, Catriona. Later!" As an afterthought, he wiped the sauce from her face off his mouth.

Perhaps the most satisfying part of the evening was the outraged expression on his date's face as she stared at the pile of gold. As he Disapparated, Sirius smirked. The Macnairs prided themselves on their large fortune and were quick to take offence at even the most imagined of slights. Suggesting Catriona couldn't afford a new dress was the worst sort of insult he could have come up with. He'd succeeded in irritating the Macnairs without even having to sleep with the girl. He hadn't obtained the intelligence he had hoped for, but otherwise this date was a complete success.

James, however, seemed not to have registered that there'd been any sort of commotion at all. The two men re-Apparated inside the lounge room of his house. Normally, Lily kept the house pristine, despite James's tendency to toss things about the place, but that day, it showed signs that her attention was otherwise occupied. A pair of shoes lay carelessly tossed upon the floor, a cloak had slid off the coat-rack, and in the kitchen, just visible through the doorway, there were signs that a meal had hastily been abandoned.

"It's happening *now*?" Sirius asked. A stupid question, really, as he'd reminded himself every time he'd relived the moment. After all, James had already said so.

"Right now," James had hissed. "Madam Pomfrey is up there with her. Sirius, I feel like I should be doing something. Boiling water or anything, except Poppy said that wouldn't do any good and that I should just stay out of their way."

James was normally the picture of elegant self-possession, but that day, he'd been agitated, barely able to stand in one spot for more than a split second. "What if something goes wrong?" he'd demanded.

"She'll be fine," Sirius assured him. Truth to be told, he was almost as anxious as the father-to-be, but for James he put on a confident air. "Madam Pomfrey knows what she's doing. Remember how many times she fixed us up at school?" Desperately, he searched for something, anything, to take James's mind off what was happening upstairs. "Remember the time you caught that Bludger in the head? She mended your skull without breaking a sweat."

That produced a grin. Sirius rather thought it might. Quidditch was usually good for cheering James up. "Ha. That wasn't nearly as bad as the time Snivellus transfigured your hand into a scorpion..."

"...and I came up in boils when it bit me," Sirius finished for him, grinning. "Remember, she had to use three different potions on me before they all went away."

"That's only because you tipped that first one down the sink when she wasn't looking!" James teased.

"Well, she told me it would give me a permanent case of acne!" Sirius defended himself, laughing. "My handsome face! What would you have done?"

"Not diluted the second one with pumpkin juice, that's for sure," James smirked.

"You didn't have to *taste* it!" Sirius reminded him. "Ugh. I still have nightmares about that stuff!"

That evening was one of Sirius's favourite memories. It was one of the last times that he and James had been so relaxed together. They'd opened a couple of bottles of Firewhiskey and settled in for a serious evening of drinking. The stories, remembered antics from their school days together, had become wilder and wilder as the alcohol took its effect. By the time Lily's birthing cries, muffled by the firmly shut door, drew James inevitably up the stairs, he was so tipsy that Poppy's admonishment to go outside and de-gnome the garden produced only drunken grumbings.

"You are going to be in so much trouble when Lily's had the baby and she wants you," Sirius had snickered. "When she sees how drunk you are, she's going to hex you so badly you'll wish you had been bitten by my scorpion hand."

"Lily would never do that," James protested. "She loves me."

But Sirius noticed he didn't touch the Firewhiskey after that.

It had seemed forever before Poppy descended down the stairs. Her eyebrow arched at the two men lounging around the room. Hastily, Sirius had pulled his feet off the couch. Even James straightened up.

"Well," Poppy said in a disapproving tone. "You are going to have to clean yourself up a bit, James Potter, if you're going to present yourself to your son."

"I have a son!" James yelled, jumping up and wrapping his arms around a rather startled Madam Pomfrey. "A son! Did you hear that, Sirius?"

Sirius had never smiled so widely in his life. "A son," he repeated. "He'll be a Quidditch player like his father, I bet. I'd better teach him about girls though, Prongs. You're hopeless with them."

Releasing Poppy, James aimed a cuff at Sirius's head, which he ducked easily. "Come on, Dad," Sirius urged. "Let's go see this son of yours."

They found Lily looking tired, but triumphant. The baby was cradled in her arms, wrapped tightly in a shawl. Sirius would never forget his first glimpse of James's son. Even as a newborn, he had a remarkable shock of black hair just like his father's. His eyes were sleepy and half-closed, his skin still a bluish red hue, and his head was oddly squashed, a side-effect of the birth, Poppy informed them, which would go away within days.

James had taken one look at his wife and son and swooped down to embrace them both. There were tears in his eyes, and tipsy though he was, there was warm sincerity in his voice as he murmured how much he loved them. Sirius felt a little choked up himself.

"Let's call him Harry," Lily had whispered, her lips against James's hair. "Harry James."

"Just as long as we name our daughter after you," James had insisted. "Merlin, Lily, you're so beautiful, and he's just perfect." Gently, he pulled one tiny hand out of the shawl and began examining each of the five fingers. "Our son," he murmured.

For a long time, James and Lily just held one another, the baby between them in a protective embrace. They hardly spoke. Lily bent her head and kissed the tiny forehead.

Sirius began to sneak out of the room to give the pair a moment of privacy, but before he'd gotten very far, James looked back at him, grinned, and asked, "Would you like to hold Harry, Padfoot?"

Sirius nodded speechlessly.

James was so gentle, supporting the baby's head as he lifted him into Sirius's arms. The baby was so tiny and so light. Sirius was almost afraid to move, just in case he broke him. James and Lily smiled fondly, watching him with their child.

The new parents exchanged a significant look. "Sirius, we have something we want to ask you," Lily said. She smiled as Sirius tore his gaze away from Harry to look over at her. "Would you be his godfather?"

"Me?" Sirius couldn't have said why he was surprised. After all, he and James had always been closer to each other than they had been to either Remus or Peter. Nevertheless, the question stunned him. "Are you sure?"

"Are we sure?" James laughed. "Of course we're sure. I can't think of anyone who'd care for him like you would. Remember, you've already promised to teach him about women."

"It'd mean a lot to both of us," Lily said.

"Of course I will." Sirius didn't even need to think twice before giving his answer. He stared down at the baby in his arms and whispered, "I'll always be there for you, Harry."

If only he had been able to keep that promise! If only Peter hadn't betrayed Lily and James and framed Sirius for his murder! Sirius had spent too much of Harry's life locked in a prison cell, despairing of ever being able to see his godson. Since his escape, he'd *tried* to make up for all those lost years, but he hadn't been able to stop Peter's escape, nor Voldemort stealing Harry's blood. He'd had to sit idle whilst Snape had taunted and bullied James's son, and now finally, the Potions master had injured him, maybe even killed him.

Harry lay in the midst of the debris from the duel. His eyes were closed. He was limp, and blood was seeping through his robes. In an instant, Sirius was by kneeling down beside him. Sirius's bruised ribs felt as though they were on fire, but he ignored the pain. It was trivial compared to what had happened to Harry. It could wait.

Close up, he could just make out the shallow rise and fall of Harry's chest. "He's alive!" he cried. "Harry, can you hear me?"

"Of course he's alive," Snape sneered. Both he and Minerva joined Sirius at Harry's side. "Do you think I'm foolish enough to try and kill you, Black?"

Narrowing his eyes, Sirius lifted his gaze to that of the Potions master. "Not with Minerva as a witness, at least," he said, enunciating each word clearly, infusing each with all the hate that boiled inside of him.

"Stop this ridiculous bickering!" Professor McGonagall snapped, glaring at both men and pushing past Snape to get closer to Harry. "Whilst you two are arguing, Harry is bleeding! We need to get him to Poppy right away. I'm ashamed of both of you. Of all the times to indulge in such stupidity! Don't you realise that Dolores is patrolling the corridors? Sirius, you at least should have had more sense. If she catches you, she'll do everything in her power to have you executed!"

"I don't care," Sirius growled. "We have to get Harry to the hospital wing. If I have to die getting him there, I will."

"Harry certainly won't thank you for that," Minerva scolded, disgust dripping from every word.

"And despite your... heroics, once again you are completely unnecessary, Black," Snape sneered. "Potter is in no danger, I assure you. I can stabilise him easily."

At any time, it would have boiled Sirius's blood to ask for help from Snape, but after what he'd just done to Harry, it was almost too much to bear. Fortunately, Minerva took the necessity from him.

"Well then, do it!" she snapped. "And hurry! We've still got to get Sirius out of here!"

"I won't leave until I know Harry's going to be okay," Sirius said. "I'm not sure we can trust you, Snape."

"Trust me, or don't," Snape said uncaringly. "I will perform my duties as a teacher at this school."

He bent over Harry, opening the boy's robes so that he could peer at the wounds. "I'll need some water," he said, glaring over at Sirius. "There's some in that cupboard. Go get it." He gestured towards the cupboard in the corner of the room where Sirius's wand had lain.

"I'm not leaving Harry's side," Sirius barked. "Who knows what you'll do to him when my back is turned?"

"Sirius Black!" Minerva snapped. "Need I remind you that I will be here with Harry? I am quite capable of protecting him myself." She narrowed her eyes at Sirius, at that moment every inch Dumbledore's second in command.

Snape smirked at Sirius. Sirius clenched his hands by his side and glared at the Potions master. He stood, refusing to give Snape the satisfaction of seeing him brace his aching ribs, and made his way over to the indicated cupboard.

There were jars, bottles, and bundled herbs lying in neat piles on the shelves. Each was precisely ordered and meticulously labelled. Aloud, he read, "Distilled water."

"That's it," Snape said impatiently. "Bring it over here."

Sirius glanced over at the two Hogwarts teachers. Snape was waving his wand at Harry and muttering an incantation. It was only Minerva's unconcerned presence beside him that stopped Sirius from cursing Snape right then.

Grabbing the bottle of water, Sirius was just about to return to Harry's side when a small bottle of clear liquid caught his eye. 'Veritaserum,' he read. Glancing behind him, he noticed that the attention of both Minerva and Snape was occupied by the prone form of his godson. Furtively, Sirius slipped the bottle into his pocket. One never knew when such a thing might come in handy.

Returning to Harry's side, Sirius thrust the bottle of water at Snape. The Potions master barely favoured him with a sneer as he poured the water on Harry's chest, chanting an incantation under his breath.

Gradually, the bleeding slowed, and Harry's white face took on a slightly more healthy hue. Snape looked up, addressing his words to Minerva. "In an hour, we'll be able to give him a restorative, and then he should be walking well enough to get him to the hospital wing without arousing too many of Professor Umbridge's suspicions."

"So we just have to wait?" Minerva snapped, frowning.

"Unless you want to risk his health further," Snape said smoothly, aiming a smirk towards Sirius. A wave of his wand dried the water from Harry's clothes.

"We'll wait," Sirius growled. "And don't even think about suggesting that I escape before Harry's recovered, Minerva."

"I wouldn't dream of such a thing," Minerva replied, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Well, since we've got an hour to wait, how about we have a drink?" Sirius suggested. He fingered the stopper of the little bottle in his pocket. Perhaps the potion would come in handy.

Questions and Answers

Chapter 5 of 9

Sirius, Severus and Minerva have some time to kill. It's time for that drink Minerva suggested.

There was nothing for it but to use a Summoning Charm to fetch some wine. Minerva would have preferred *not* to have a bottle and three glasses hurtling through the castle whilst Dolores was on the prowl, but she had very little choice. Sirius couldn't leave Snape's office, not without risking the Headmistress discovering him; Snape was out of the question, too, since he was the only one whose understanding of the spell he'd cast on Harry was complete enough to help the boy, and Minerva wasn't leaving those two alone together again, so she couldn't go and fetch it either. The kitchens weren't very far away, anyway, and the chances of Umbridge seeing and coming to investigate the flying wine bottle were quite slim.

"How is Harry?" she asked Severus, trying to keep her voice steady and even. Even if the boy hadn't been the intended recipient of the spell, the fact remained that the Potions master had cursed a student. If she hadn't been so worried, and if tensions between Snape and Sirius hadn't already been strained to the limit, Minerva would have given the man a piece of her mind. As it was, she saved the lecture until later. Albus, too, would want to discuss this matter with Snape in detail.

"Weak." As usual, Severus wasted few words.

Sirius sent a glare at the other man. "Whose fault is that?" he hissed.

"I rather think that it's yours," Severus drawled. "You intruded on my office uninvited."

"My fault?" Sirius exploded. "How dare you? If you hadn't thrown that curse..."

"Severus Snape and Sirius Black," Minerva scolded. She glared at the first one man, then the other. "Stop this bickering at once!"

The men glowered at one another, each refusing to look away, as though they were trying to outstare each other. They may have silenced at her command, but the tension in the room was still thick enough to be cut with a knife. It was time to get that wine. Surely that would make the atmosphere a little more convivial.

"*Accio* wine! *Accio* wineglasses!" Minerva held up three fingers to indicate how many she required. "Sirius, if you please, I only have two hands."

Sirius frowned irritably, obviously displeased that his attention had been called away from his unconscious godson. It was perhaps only force of habit towards his former Head of House that constrained his response to a polite, "Of course, Minerva."

The wine bottle flew into the room, landing neatly in Minerva's outstretched hand. Moments later, three wine glasses chased each other in through the door. By then, Sirius was by Minerva's side. He deftly caught two of them, leaving the third for the Transfiguration professor.

"Now, perhaps we can behave in a civilised manner," Minerva suggested, arching her eyebrow at the fugitive. "Sirius, if you will pour, I will check on Harry."

She must have imagined the flash of triumph in Sirius's eyes. Surely the man couldn't possibly wish to give up his place at his godson's side for her. "Certainly, Minerva," he said, flashing her a charming smile. The smile lit up his face, and for a moment, it was a shadow of the handsome visage of his pre-Azkaban days.

Minerva frowned repressively back at Sirius. She remembered that smile all too well from the hundreds of times he'd been sent to her with a note from a teacher. That smile usually meant that Sirius was up to mischief. "Just behave yourself," she admonished him. The innocent look he favoured her with only confirmed her suspicions. When she was sure Harry was recovering, she'd make a point of discovering what he was up to.

Harry's colour had improved even more, and the blood flow from his wound had ceased altogether. His breathing was deep and even, and if his robes hadn't been covered in drying blood, he would have seemed to be in a deep sleep.

"He looks better," Minerva observed, glancing at the Potions master, who was once again muttering incantations under his breath.

Severus didn't bother to answer her until he'd finished chanting. Then, he looked up, observing, "In a few days, he'll be completely recovered. He'll need regular doses of the restorative potion, but otherwise, there's no reason why he shouldn't be back in class."

On an impulse, Minerva reached over to gently smooth Harry's hair. Almost immediately, it sprung back up, just as messy as ever.

"James once tried to bewitch his hair to sit like that," Sirius observed, returning to her side and staring down at Harry. "He liked the way it made him look like he'd just got off his broomstick."

"Did it work?" Minerva wondered absently.

"Who could tell with James?" Sirius said, his voice taking on a cheerful note. "He was so busy mussing it up that nobody had any idea how it fell naturally."

"Maybe he passed the enchantment onto his son," Minerva suggested, half-fascinated and half-amused, taking the glass that Sirius offered.

"It *does* sound like the sort of ridiculous thing Potter would do," Severus sneered.

The smile faded from Sirius's face, and he narrowed his eyes at Snape. "Well, at least he wasn't dabbling in dark magic and joining the Death Eaters," he snapped.

Once again, the two men glared at each other. The naked hatred in their faces was so intense that Minerva was sure that even the slightest provocation would lead to more violence. "Stop it, both of you!" she scolded. She had to do something before things got out of hand. "Let's just drink our wine and try and tolerate one another until we can get Harry out of here."

Under her baleful glare, Sirius passed Snape one of the glasses. The potions master glared at it, and as Sirius lifted his own to his lips said, "I believe I'll have your glass instead, Black."

Surprisingly, Sirius didn't rise to the implication. "If it makes you feel safer, I wouldn't dream of refusing you," he drawled insultingly. He took the glass from Severus and offered his own. Severus snatched it from him and, smirking triumphantly, sniffed the wine.

Sirius smiled too, his expression devoid of concern. Without breaking eye-contact with Severus, he drained his glass.

"Well, I guess I'll live," he pronounced. "Are you still scared, Snape? Maybe you'd better go and drink some milk from your mama, just to make sure I haven't poisoned you."

"Honestly!" Minerva scolded. "Can't you two be civil for even a moment? The wine isn't poisoned, Severus." In demonstration, she took a long sip of her own glass.

Glaring at Sirius, Snape too took a swig. "Black hasn't the courage to try and kill me," he sneered. "It's beyond my imagination how anyone could have believed he would have the nerve to commit one murder, let alone thirteen."

"Yes, that's more your style, isn't it, Snape?" Sirius suggested affably. "How many murders have you committed? Surely He-Who-Thinks-He's-Too-Good-To-Be-Named had a few special assignments for you?"

Snorting, Snape shook his head. "You're a fool, Black. Do you think the Dark Lord would expose me for such crass purposes when keeping me out of the public eye served him so much better? I am the best spy he ever had."

"That's hardly a boast," Sirius sneered. "I've seen some of the idiots that call themselves Death Eaters."

"Would you mess with Bellatrix Lestrange?" Snape countered. "Or Lucius Malfoy? Yet even those two always stood lower in the Dark Lord's esteem than I."

"Really?" Sirius prompted, his lip curled in distaste. "And yet now you find yourself a member of the Order. Isn't it odd how you've managed to gain the trust of Voldemort's most hated enemy?"

"*Do not speak his name,*" Snape hissed furiously.

"Gentlemen!" Minerva broke in, glaring from one to the other. "This is hardly the time or the place to discuss this! Sirius, Dumbledore has always known this." She attempted to keep the shock out of her voice. Although Albus had confided many details of Snape's past to her (although certainly not all), she had never before heard the man himself talk of his life as a Death Eater. The pride in his tone, the near-reverence he used when speaking of Voldemort, and the disdain in his expression as he challenged the two of them sent a cold chill of horror through her.

"Not even he realises how valuable I am to both sides," Snape sneered. "Dumbledore is a trusting fool. You know it, don't you Minerva?"

"He's always been too ready to see the best in everyone," Minerva conceded reluctantly. "I believe that if Voldemort came to him and asked for mercy, that he would grant even him leniency."

"And he would be killed!" Snape crowed, apparently not as concerned with her use of Voldemort's name as Sirius's. "The Dark Lord is capable of such cruelty that our esteemed Headmaster could not begin to comprehend it. The Dark Lord would swat him like a bug."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus," Minerva growled. "Dumbledore is the only wizard Voldemort has ever feared. His powers are far beyond your imagining."

"Spare us your sentimental rubbish, Minerva," Severus replied. "If you weren't so blind with lust for the man, you'd see how ill-equipped he is to stand against the Dark Lord's power."

Rage filled Minerva. "Don't you dare cheapen my feelings for Albus by comparing them to the tawdry emotions you are capable of experiencing!" she snapped. "You could not possibly understand what he means to me. You wouldn't even know the first thing about love."

Minerva was so surprised at the words coming out of her mouth, words that she hadn't before even dared think, let alone enunciate, that her hand flew to her mouth and all her anger dissipated like fog on a summer morning.

"Oh, I've had plenty of lessons," Severus snapped, oblivious to her sudden change in demeanour. "Narcissa Malfoy was quite enthusiastic about disabusing me on that very topic. Love is a feeble excuse for acting upon your most base impulses."

"Narcissa Malfoy?" Sirius drawled, his eyes flickering over to Minerva and then back to the Potions master. "My cousin wouldn't sully herself by associating with someone like you."

"Why don't you ask her about it, then, Black?" Severus snapped. "Ask her who the father of her son is. Oh, you can't, can you? You're too busy skulking in your mama's house."

Something clicked inside Minerva's head. Her uncharacteristic and unintended revelation coupled with Snape's equally unusual boasting suddenly explained why Sirius had looked so triumphant when he was asked to pour the wine. He'd drugged them! She shot him a narrow-eyed glare. He'd drunk the wine too. Had he intentionally offered Snape the untainted glass, knowing that the Potions master's distrust would inevitably lead him into demanding that Sirius exchange with him?

As if he could read her thoughts, Sirius turned and smiled charmingly at her. Turning so that he faced away from the Potions master, he reached in to the pocket of his robe and pulled out a vial neatly labelled in Severus's handwriting. She took a step closer and was just able to make out the words 'Veritas serum antidote' before he slid it back into his pocket.

"Well, that explains why you're always favouring him," Sirius drawled, "and why you deliberately sabotaged Harry's Occlumency lessons. You would do anything to neutralise Draco's rival, wouldn't you?"

"Potter is way too foolish not to walk into a trap," Snape smirked. "Undoubtedly, he thinks of it as bravery. I must admit, though, I was astonished at how easy he was to dupe. An unattended Pensieve was all that it took to ensnare him. *He's* Dumbledore's weapon against the Dark Lord? You all don't have a hope!"

Her mind racing furiously, Minerva realised that, as underhanded as Sirius's methods were, this was the best opportunity she'd ever have to obtain some invaluable information. "And just whose side are you on, Severus?" she asked mildly.

She was too late. The high emotion permeating the room might have carried Snape this far, but it appeared that with that last exultation, he'd finally realised what had been done to him. His eyes grew cold, and instead of answering her question, he turned to Sirius and said, "The antidote, Black, now."

"Actually," Sirius smiled, "I'd rather like to know the answer to that question too."

"The antidote," Severus repeated angrily. "Give it to me now, or I won't help your godson any further."

Sirius stared at him, startled. Under the influence of Veritaserum, there could be no doubt that Snape meant what he said, and clearly Sirius hadn't considered that the Potions master would use Harry's condition against him. It took Sirius a moment to formulate a response, and then, glaring, he pulled the bottle out of his pocket and handed it not to Snape, but to Minerva. "You first," he said.

Minerva was never so relieved to be given something in her life. It had been years since she had felt as vulnerable as she did then. She was just glad that she'd worked out what was happening soon enough to avoid compromising herself any more than she had. She was already mortified at what she *had* revealed. What if Albus heard of it?

She was not, however, so desperate that she forgot herself. Rather than drinking straight from the bottle, as she suspected Sirius had done, she flicked her wand, and a teacup and saucer appeared floating in the air in front of her. Pocketing her wand, she took the teacup and poured a small amount of the antidote inside it.

When it was Severus's turn, he almost snatched the antidote bottle out of Minerva's hand. "It doesn't take a great deal of thought to work out where your godson gets his larcenous habits, Black," he sneered. "Stay out of my stores."

"As I recall, it was you who sent me to them in the first place," Sirius observed mildly, a smile playing around the corner of his mouth.

"*Not* to steal potions!" Snape growled.

"Oh, I think that was a very enlightening exercise," Sirius said. "And I find it quite fascinating that you refused to answer Minerva's question."

"I won't be interrogated by you," Snape snarled. Deliberately, he turned his back on Sirius and Minerva as he downed the antidote in one large gulp.

Minerva turned to Sirius. Now that she was over the first wave of relief that the potion's effects had been neutralised, she could feel rage welling up inside of her.

"How could you do this to me?" she hissed angrily.

"I could hardly alert you without Snape noticing," Sirius pointed out calmly, seemingly unsurprised at her anger. "I wanted to make him admit he flouted Dumbledore's orders to teach Harry."

"You made a fool of me," she accused.

"Not intentionally," Sirius said. There was no evidence of contrition in his tone. He glanced over at Snape and then back to Minerva. "And it was necessary. So, does Albus know how you feel?"

Minerva had no intention of admitting that she herself had not realised how deeply her feelings ran until she had blurted them out. She paused, taking her time to formulate her response. She owed Sirius no answers. On the other hand, there was damage control to consider. "Nobody knows. I trust this will stay in this room."

Severus turned, favouring the other two with a sneer. Apparently he was not as oblivious to their conversation as Minerva had thought. "A bargain, Minerva," he said. "Keep quiet about my connection to Malfoy and his mother and I'll keep your secret about Dumbledore."

Minerva hesitated, frowning. Was it worth it? Would Snape's relationship to Draco become important later? Considering the Potions master thoughtfully, she realised that there could be no doubt that Snape favoured the boy. Albus already knew that there was a connection between them. There was no reason to expose Severus's secret.

"I agree," she said shortly.

"And perhaps..." Snape began, but he was interrupted rudely.

Sirius had crouched down next to Harry again. Claspng the boy's hand, he turned to Minerva excitedly. "He's waking up!" he cried.

Whatever Snape was going to say was lost in the resulting commotion

Awakening

Chapter 6 of 9

What happens to Harry? And has the danger to him and Sirius really passed?

The first thing Harry noticed was that he was lying on a hard, cold floor. There was a sticky crustiness on the front of his open robes, his chest stung with surprising heat, and he felt weak and exhausted. Opening his eyes was a laborious business. His eyelids felt so heavy.

"Harry, are you okay?" Sirius sounded frantic. He had hold of Harry's hand. His grip felt warm, comforting, reassuring.

For him, Harry made an extra effort, finally managing to eke out a groan.

"Harry, we're going to take care of you," Sirius hissed urgently. "Just hang in there!"

"Sirius." All in all, that one word was a spectacular endeavour, one that his godfather seemed to appreciate, since he gathered Harry against him.

"Harry, what possessed you to jump in front of that hex like that?" Sirius whispered urgently. "You could have beerkilled!"

"As I have already mentioned," a bored, disgusted voice broke in Snape's voice "I had no intention of killing you, Black, and the boy will suffer few ill-effects from the spell. He'll be up and performing incompetently in my class in no time."

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Harry mumbled. "I just didn't want to see you hurt. I didn't want to worry you."

"The important thing is that you're going to get better," Professor McGonagall said briskly, crouching down beside Harry alongside Sirius. "Professor Snape will be giving

you a restorative soon. That will help you get back on your feet, and then we should be able to get you to the hospital wing without the Headmistress asking you awkward questions."

"I'm not taking any potion *he* brews!" Harry grumbled. With some effort, he craned his head to look past Professor McGonagall and over at the looming form of Professor Snape.

"Touching as your affection for me is," Snape sneered, "we don't have time for your ridiculous nonsense."

"I won't take it!" Harry gasped, his gaze skidding painfully back to Sirius. "Who knows what he'll put in it?"

Sirius exchanged a look with Professor McGonagall, his expression tight. "He has a point, Minerva," he pointed out. "Snape has already proven once tonight that he cannot be trusted."

Professor McGonagall looked torn herself, but after a few moments of seeming indecision, she announced, "He has Professor Dumbledore's trust, and I have confidence in Albus's judgement. I don't believe Severus would deliberately harm the boy."

"Perhaps your godson has failed to inform you of the efforts I have made to protect him since he has been at Hogwarts, Black?" Snape drawled. "I would hardly ruin all my good work now, even if it *is* wasted on a foolish dunderhead like Potter."

Sirius's hands on Harry clenched tightly, almost painfully so, as he glowered at Snape. The Potions professor glared right back at him.

"Do you need to make the restorative, Severus, or is there some handy?" Minerva asked, her voice cutting across the tension in the room.

"I have one bottle left," Snape responded, glancing away from Sirius. "Fortunately, Black missed that in his demolition of my office."

Sirius snorted in response. Instead of rising to that jibe, he focussed his attention on his godson once more. "Harry, if Professor McGonagall and I help you, do you think you could sit up now?"

Harry's chest still ached, but he found he could breathe reasonably easily. "I think so," he said.

With much heaving from Sirius and Professor McGonagall, Harry was pulled to a sitting position. Shards of glass tinkled as they were dislodged from their resting places near him. The movement tore at the pain in his chest, and he stifled a groan. Sirius, he could see, was not fooled at all by his attempt at bravery. "Maybe we should have left you lying there a bit longer," the man muttered.

"No, it's okay," Harry protested. "I'm fine." His voice sounded weak and exhausted. Not even *he* believed it. When Sirius crouched behind him to support his back, he didn't object.

"Stay there for a moment. Don't try and move again just yet," Professor McGonagall advised, her expression grave.

Professor Snape squatted down beside Harry and, without explanation, produced a bottle and poured a small amount of clear liquid over his chest. He began to chant an incantation under his breath.

"Hey!" Harry snapped, trying weakly to scramble away. "Stop that!"

"Harry, stop struggling and let Professor Snape heal you," Professor McGonagall admonished him. "He has already stopped the bleeding."

"It's okay, Harry," Sirius cut in, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I won't let anyone hurt you." The man's voiced *id* sound a little stilted, however, and the hands that held Harry upright felt tense and stiff.

Gritting his teeth, Harry attempted to relax, trying to ignore the chill sinking into his chest as Snape continued the spell. It wasn't easy. He kept remembering that green light flashing out of the professor's wand and the searing pain as it hit him across the chest. He kept seeing his bound, bruised godfather suspended in mid-air in Snape's office. Now he was supposed to trust the man?

The chant seemed to go on forever, and the water on his chest chilled him. However hard he tried not to show weakness, Harry couldn't stop his teeth from chattering wildly.

"He's freezing," Sirius snapped angrily, craning around to examine his godson. "His lips are turning blue."

Snape continued to chant without pausing to answer.

Professor McGonagall reached down to cover Sirius's hand on Harry's shoulder with hers. "Severus can't stop mid-incantation," she explained. "We'll dry Harry off as soon as he is done." Then, bending over Harry, she whispered, "It won't take long."

Harry tried to smile at her, but he was sure that all he managed was a stiff, weak effort. Professor McGonagall smiled back, her expression surprisingly gentle. Then, standing straight, she sketched a shape in the air with her wand. A fuzzy tartan blanket dropped into her hands. Sirius took it and draped it around Harry's shoulders. It was wonderfully soft and incredibly cosy. Harry could feel the warmth creeping over him, doing battle against the cold induced by Snape's spell and the water that soaked the front of his robes.

Moments later, Snape's chant ceased, and he dried Harry's robes with magic. Sirius pulled Harry's robe shut and wrapped the blanket all the way around him. Harry began to feel almost comfortable. Even the pain in his chest had receded to a dull ache, and he had to grudgingly admit that he probably had Snape to thank for it. He couldn't quite bring himself to express gratitude towards the Potions master though. Not after what Snape had done to him, and what he had done to Sirius, and what he had tried to do. He settled for sullenly glancing away from the man and rasping to Sirius, "I'm thirsty."

"Better stay away from the wine," Sirius suggested, a hint of mischief in his voice.

Harry managed to catch a glimpse of Snape's face just as his godfather spoke those words. The Potions professor's expression was livid, hate-filled, and directed right at his godfather. What was that about?

Professor McGonagall seemed to be equally irritated. "Quite," she said frostily. Her face had turned stern and indecipherable. She, too, was glaring at Sirius.

"How about some pumpkin juice?" Sirius suggested cheerfully.

"I'll get it," Professor McGonagall grumbled, her voice tight and angry. "I presume you two gentlemen can be trusted now that Harry is awake." She glared from Sirius to Snape and then back again. "I won't be long," she added, striding out the door and closing it with a bang.

"Sirius..." Harry turned his head a task much easier now than it had been when he first regained consciousness. "Is everything okay?"

"Nothing to worry about," Sirius assured him jovially. Harry could hear the smile in his voice. "She'll get over it."

"Oh, yes," Snape drawled scornfully, "don't explain for precious Potter. It wouldn't do for him not to think well of his godfather."

Harry glanced over at the Potions professor, his curiosity heightened by Snape's words.

"Perhaps you wish to tell him, *Snivellus*?" Sirius suggested easily. "Please, feel free to explain. I have nothing to hide." There was a jibe hidden in those words.

"Except your penchant for larceny," Snape snapped.

"Everyone has failings," Sirius responded with blithe unconcern. "I'm sure Harry won't hold it against me."

"Likely not," Snape growled, transferring his glare to Harry, who narrowed his eyes back at the professor. "Your godson is every bit as bad."

"Delighted to hear it," Sirius responded cheerfully, squeezing Harry's shoulder affectionately.

Glaring coldly at Sirius, Snape turned to the cupboard in the corner of his office, rummaging around until he produced a bottle filled with blue liquid. Returning to Harry's side, he unstoppered it and held it out to him. "Drink all of this," he said.

"What is it?" asked Harry suspiciously. He eyed the bottle, but did not take it.

Snape thrust it closer to him. "You need to drink this to counter the residual effects of the spell on you. It is a restorative. You are still weak, as I'm sure you're well aware. This will enable you to get to the hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey can give you something more permanently effective. That is all I intend to explain myself. Drink it, Potter, and don't waste my time."

"It's okay, Harry," Sirius said. "Snape won't do anything to harm you." His voice was steely. "Not unless he wants everyone to know all about his uh... secret project."

The glare that Snape shot over Harry's shoulder at Sirius was murderous. "I assure you, I only have my student's best interests at heart," he growled. "As for my *project* as you call it, your very location is a secret which must be carefully guarded, is it not, Black? I can keep silent just as long as you can." The threat was palpable.

"Drink the potion, Harry," Sirius suggested, his voice devoid of any concern. "Snape knows that if he harms you, I won't allow the threat of his knowledge of me to keep me from doing what I must."

Snape shoved the bottle at Harry with such angry force that the blue liquid almost slopped over the edge. "It will do exactly what I've said it will," he grated. "I tire of all this endless debate. Drink it, Potter."

It was Sirius's suggestion, not Snape's, that convinced Harry to comply. He took the bottle, and with an anxious glance over his shoulder at Sirius's encouraging expression, he took a tentative sip. Tendrils of warmth and wellbeing began to spread through his body.

"All of it, I said," Snape persisted.

Sighing, Harry downed the lot. The tendrils turned into a flood of health. After a few moments, Harry felt well enough to stand. He didn't even wobble on his feet. He could have almost thanked the Potions master.

"My NEWT students learn to make that potion," Snape observed. "Not that you will ever perform well enough to make it into that class, Potter."

"Maybe that is because of your failings as a teacher," Sirius noted acerbically.

"Or perhaps, like his father, he believes that he knows everything already and is therefore impossible to teach," Snape shot back.

"You're still jealous of James, aren't you?" Sirius sneered. "You can't get over the fact that you needed to wait until his back was turned to be able to get the better of him. Look at you. You're still doing it. You're using underhanded methods to settle the score, taking your resentment of James out on his son. Harry isn't lacking in talent, you just refuse to teach him properly."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Black," Snape snapped.

"I think I do," Sirius said knowingly. "I think "

"Really, Dolores, you'd be surprised how easily I find my way around Hogwarts *without* your help."

Professor McGonagall's words, spoken just outside the door, silenced Sirius mid-sentence. He glanced between Harry and Snape, and then, lightning-fast, pulled Harry to the corner of the room behind the door. It opened slowly, and Professor Umbridge's reply could be heard quite clearly.

"It was no trouble," the Headmistress said, her voice smug and knowing.

"Well, here we are. Goodnight, Dolores," Professor McGonagall said firmly. The door opened further, and Harry and Sirius covered their ears at the noise it made. As Professor McGonagall slipped through, her eyes fell on Sirius and Harry squeezed behind the door, and her lips tightened. The moment she was through, she quite firmly began to shut the door behind herself. The movement was halted just before the door closed completely.

"Oh, I think I'll just come in and have a word with you and Professor Snape before I go to bed," Professor Umbridge replied.

Harry could see Professor McGonagall's face settle into a stiff smile. "Of course, Dolores," she gritted out. "I'm sure Professor Snape will be quite happy to see you."

The door began to open again. Harry stared desperately at Professor McGonagall. In moments both he and Sirius would be exposed.

Interrogation

Chapter 7 of 9

The arrival of Dolores Umbridge poses a risk to Harry, Minerva and Severus, but most of all, to Sirius.

Minerva only had moments to act. Dolores, determined to gain entry to Severus's office, was shoving the door quite hard. With a single step inside, not only would she see Harry's blood-stained robes and they would pose enough questions of their own but Sirius's presence would be revealed. Sirius would be sent back to Azkaban, and she

and Severus and Harry, as perceived accessories, would probably follow soon after.

Sirius was quick-thinking. Already he was transforming into the big black dog. Minerva wished that that would solve the problem. She was certain that some in the Ministry knew about his Animagus form, and even if Dolores was not amongst their number, she was sure to query the presence of an animal in Snape's office. Harry's Invisibility Cloak lay way out of reach on the other side of the room, and a summoning charm would bring it flying right in front of Umbridge's view.

Harry and Minerva exchanged looks. Harry seemed unafraid, and Sirius, now in his dog form, bared his teeth, snarling. Minerva shook her head, her thoughts racing. Quickly, she shoved back against the door, making opening difficult and buying them a little more time. Harry, following her lead, moved to her side, shoving against it in concert with her. His face contorted with the pain the effort cost him. Minerva admired the courage that he showed in ignoring the agony from his wounds and continuing to fight to delay the opening of the door.

"Open this door!" Dolores shrieked, pushing harder. Harry and Minerva could probably easily overpower her, but not without raising questions about why the Headmistress had been denied entrance. Minerva had to come up with another solution quickly.

"It's stuck!" Minerva called. "It does that sometimes." She had no objection to bare-faced lies under the current circumstances.

She and Harry exchanged another look. Leaning closer to him, Minerva hissed, her voice only loud enough to reach his ears, "Keep pushing." The noise the door was making as it scraped along the ground would have blocked out a louder voice than she was using, but she was taking no chances.

With the Invisibility Cloak out of reach, the Floo network being watched and Apparition impossible within the castle, there was only one solution that Minerva could come up with in the short time she had available to her. She whipped out her wand and gestured for Sirius to stand by Harry. In moments, she had transfigured them into a dog-shaped doorstop and an innocuous-looking cupboard.

She caught the door just in time. With Harry unable to push back on it, it would have swung open easily under Dolores's hand, but Minerva wedged herself behind it. "Just stand back, Dolores!" she called. "I think I've got it!" She pushed the door fractionally closed and then opened it. "That's got it," she said.

The Headmistress was out of breath, leaning against the open door. As she glanced around the office and took in the glass, blood and potion ingredients that still littered the room, her jaw set in annoyance, and she folded her arms and pursed her lips. "Well," she said, glaring at the teachers. "Do the two of you have something to tell me?"

Snape was leaning back against the wall, his arms folded and the customary disdainful expression firmly on his face. "Good evening," he greeted Dolores coldly. "I would invite you in, but it appears you have already found your way."

Umbridge afforded him a tight smile. "I'm sure you would not deny me entrance, Professor Snape, unless, of course, you were trying to hide something from me."

"I cannot imagine what I would possibly wish to hide from you, Headmistress," Snape replied, boredom suffusing every word.

"Really?" Umbridge responded with disbelief. "Well, perhaps you'd care to explain this wreckage, then?" She glared first at Snape and then Minerva, challenging them both.

"An accident," Snape lied easily. "They occur occasionally when formulating new potions."

Minerva kept her own face impassive.

"And what are *you* doing here late at night?" Umbridge shot at her.

Minerva didn't even bother to formulate an excuse. "That's really none of your business,"

"Oh, I think that it is," Umbridge responded triumphantly. "Teachers meeting secretly in the middle of the night? Don't think that I don't know what's going on. You were plotting against me, weren't you? I knew you would go to any lengths to undermine me, Minerva, but I am very disappointed in *you*, Snape."

Severus just sneered at her, seemingly unaffected by the Headmistress's displeasure.

"Dear me," Dolores continued. "I shall have to widen the scope of the Educational Decrees. Let's see, how should we word the next one? Hmmmm. 'Teachers are hereby forbidden from congregating, except for meals and staff meetings presided over by the Headmistress.'" She shot a smug little smile at the other two teachers. "Yes, I think that will do nicely."

"Really, Dolores," Minerva responded, her voice dripping with disgust. "I have better things to do with my time than concern myself with you. I have no need to weaken your position. You are doing it admirably without my help."

Umbridge pressed her lips very firmly together. "Don't think you can fool me so easily, Minerva. I am hardly stupid. I see no other reason for the two of you to meet secretly like this, not unless..."

Dolores narrowed her eyes suspiciously, first at Minerva, then Severus. "Unless the two of you are having *romantic* liaison?" she guessed. Once again she took in the disorder in the room. "And you had a fight, didn't you? A lovers' quarrel. *That* explains everything!" Her eyes lit up in smug triumph. "Well, well, well. The ever-so-superior Minerva, descending to throw things around the room."

Snape's face was suffused with rage. "We most certainly were *not* having a lovers' quarrel. How dare you!"

Minerva was equally repulsed. "Once again your imagination gets the better of you, Dolores," she snapped.

"Well, if it wasn't a lovers' quarrel, then you *must* have been plotting against me," Dolores simpered smugly. "After Professor Snape's uh... potions accident."

"The truth is," Snape cut in, "we *were* speaking of you."

"I knew it!" Umbridge crowed.

"But..." Snape continued smoothly, "we were not plotting against you. Minerva and I are distressed at the disruptiveness of the student body since you took on your new role as Headmistress and were trying to determine how such a situation could be resolved. After all, the students' welfare is foremost in both our minds. Such disruption does not aid student learning."

"Yes, yes," Umbridge said eagerly, easily swayed by sentiments so close to her own heart. "But the mess!"

"I'm afraid we disagreed quite strongly on the cause of the problem," Snape said smoothly. "I attributed the entire thing to the Weasley twins, who, as you know, caused that shocking display in the Entrance Hall."

Umbridge was by now completely persuaded. "Yes, exactly!" she said excitedly. "But Minerva did not agree?"

"Minerva, as you know," Severus continued, "has a distressing preference towards students of her own house. Undoubtedly, it makes her popular with her students, but it does make her rather short-sighted when it comes to recognising their weaknesses."

With difficulty, Minerva restrained herself from strangling Snape. How ironic that *he* should make that accusation of *her*.

"Just like when she went to Dumbledore to have the Gryffindor Quidditch team reformed," Dolores supplied, entranced by this new turn of events. "So what did she attribute the problem to?"

Snape looked across at Minerva, who narrowed her eyes back at him, waiting to see how deeply he would incriminate her. "Slytherin students," he said after a long pause. "You know how prejudiced she is against them."

"Of *course!*" Umbridge crowed. "I see why you fought so viciously now. The Gryffindor Head of House and the Slytherin Head of House each defending their students against the other! It's admirable that you both show such loyalty to your houses, even if yours, Minerva, is misguided. You must see how well the Slytherins assist me."

"Quite," Minerva responded through clenched teeth.

"It's just as well you two did meet at night," Umbridge continued. "What a terrible example to the students this would have been. It would have incited them to worse disruptions! I trust this will all be cleaned up before any of them see it?"

"Naturally," Snape said. "Now if you will excuse us..."

But Minerva, struck with a sudden idea, cut in, "Perhaps now that it's all sorted out, you'd be so kind as to take a glass of wine with us, Dolores? Severus and I thought if we had a drink together, we might restore the harmony which has underpinned our working relationship."

For a moment, Minerva was certain that Umbridge's suspicious nature would see right through the invitation and that she would refuse. However, after a slight pause, the Headmistress simpered and said, "Oh, very well, as it's important to you."

Barely suppressing the urge to roll her eyes, Minerva once again filled three glasses with the wine and handed one each to Severus and Dolores before taking the third for herself. She noticed that Dolores was not entirely taken in; the woman refused to touch her glass until the two other teachers had both taken a drink.

Minerva took a long, ostentatious sip and was rewarded when Dolores finally partook of her own glass.

"You must have been delighted to become Headmistress," Minerva prompted once she'd given the Veritas serum time to work. She and Snape, of course, were still protected by the antidote they'd taken. "And I'm sure the Minister was thrilled too."

"It was only a matter of time, of course," Umbridge said, smiling smugly. "The Minister always intended for me to take over the school."

Somehow Minerva managed to keep her irritation at that revelation out of her expression. "Really?" she asked, glancing meaningfully at Snape. Severus glanced away in a bored fashion.

"Oh, yes. He's known for years that Dumbledore meant to come up against him," Umbridge continued chattily. "Of course, it's always been a quandary, how to deal with it quietly. Somehow, Dumbledore seems to have garnered himself quite a lot of support amongst the wider community. It just wouldn't have done to strip him of office publicly."

Minerva struggled to keep a smile on her face. It took an immense effort. She had to keep Umbridge talking. Having drunk the wine, the Headmistress had no choice but to tell the truth, of course, and it would be easy to force answers out of her, but that would arouse her suspicions, and that might cost Minerva her job. Minerva took no satisfaction from being at Hogwarts now Umbridge had replaced Dumbledore, but there were the students to think of. Not only that, but Albus had asked her to stay, and for him, she would do anything. She knew that somehow Dumbledore would get himself reinstated, and when he did, she intended to be there waiting for him. Whatever she could discover from this woman might aid his return; it might even help the Order.

Somehow, she found her voice. "I suppose it wouldn't," she gritted out.

"We knew that Dumbledore was recruiting Hogwarts students to aid him against the Ministry," Umbridge continued conversationally. "We had to undermine his power base. Naturally, when he was unable to fill the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, it presented us with an irresistible opportunity."

"Naturally," Minerva said dryly.

Severus, she could see, had clenched his jaw tightly shut, his rage almost palpable. He had pointed out on a number of occasions that if he'd been given the Defence Against the Dark Arts position as he had requested, the Ministry never would have been able to infiltrate the school. No doubt he was brooding on that right then.

"It's rather funny, really," Umbridge tittered.

"I can't imagine how it could be," Minerva responded repressively, turning her gaze back to the Headmistress.

"Me as a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher," the Headmistress said. "I didn't take it as a NEWT subject."

Minerva paused, staring at the woman. "You didn't?"

"Oh, no," Umbridge simpered. "I only scored a D at OWL level, and so I wasn't accepted into the NEWT class. Of course, it really doesn't matter. There's nothing about teaching that requires you to be *good* at your subject is there?"

Not even for Albus could Minerva have managed to agree with the woman. The best she could do was to ask, "Isn't there?"

"Of course not. The students learn everything they need to know out of Wilbert Slinkhard's book," Umbridge pronounced triumphantly.

Minerva took some long, deep breaths. She was sorely tempted to follow Moody's example or rather, the example of Barty Crouch, who'd been impersonating him and turn the Headmistress into a ferret, bouncing her around the room for a while to knock some sense into her. That, however, while affording Minerva a great deal of satisfaction, would do nothing to help either the students or Albus.

Whilst she struggled to think of a response, she was interrupted by Snape.

"You failed your Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL?" Snape prompted.

"I'm sure it was a misunderstanding," Umbridge tittered. "I told the examiner that as long as I ingratiated myself with the right people, there was *no need* to use defensive spells."

"Ah," Snape responded with every semblance of interest. "And that's what you did."

"Of course," Umbridge replied, showing her small, pointy teeth as she smiled. "I joined the Ministry as soon as I left Hogwarts. I had to lie a little to get the job, but the end justified the means. Cornelius was my mentor. It was a shame he was married, but we didn't allow that to interfere with our relationship, and of course, when he rose within the Ministry, he took me with him." She offered Snape a smug little smile. "Promotions aren't always because of ability, at least," she paused to smirk there, "not always ability at your job. Look at young Weasley! He would never have made it out of the Department of International Cooperation if it hadn't served the Ministry's purpose to have him where we could keep an eye on him. After all, look at the mess he made of his last position!"

"Quite," Severus said, keeping his face carefully neutral.

"So, naturally, when Cornelius wanted someone he could trust inside Hogwarts, he asked me to take on the position. I was only too happy to oblige."

"I'm sure you were," Minerva muttered to herself.

"It does you no service to set yourselves against the Ministry," Dolores continued, taking another sip of her wine. "We will win in the end. After all, haven't we already deposed the mighty Albus Dumbledore?"

"Indeed you have," Snape responded smoothly. "Fudge must be very happy to have someone like you so close. I suppose you know all of his secrets."

Minerva's gaze whipped across to the Potions professor. His expression was bland, giving nothing away.

Umbridge appeared not to suspect a thing. Blithely, she continued to prattle on, "Oh, yes. He trusts nobody as much as me, not even his own wife."

"Really?" Snape said interestedly. "What sort of secrets does he entrust to you?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you, do you?" Umbridge asked with a smug little smile. "Cornelius's secrets are between me and him. After all, it wouldn't do for it to get out that he wears women's underwear, now would it?"

Minerva had taken an ill-considered sip of her wine at the very moment that Dolores had let that titbit slip. She began to cough as the liquid went down the wrong way.

"Are you okay, Minerva?" Umbridge asked sweetly.

"Perfectly," Minerva managed to gasp, her eyes watering. "You were saying?"

"Oh, enough about Cornelius," Umbridge replied stoutly. "I can't reveal Ministry secrets, after all."

"Naturally," Snape said, his voice thick with sarcasm.

Finishing off the last of her wine, Dolores wandered over to the intact cupboard. As she placed her empty glass on one of the shelves, her eyes lit on Harry's Invisibility Cloak crumpled on the ground nearby.

"What's this?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

Minerva strode over to the cloak, lunging for it just as the Headmistress closed her own fingers over it. Rather than rip it, Minerva let the fabric slip through her hands, returning Umbridge's triumphant little smile with a bland one of her own.

"Something I found hidden," Minerva said.

"Educational Decree number thirty specifically states that all such devices should be handed over to me!" Umbridge snapped. "Why did you not do so immediately?"

Once again, Minerva had to take a deep breath to prevent herself from saying or doing something she would later regret. "Obviously, I was on my way to do so," she lied through gritted teeth. "However, first I felt it necessary to have this discussion with Severus. The OWLs are fast approaching, and the fifth years need to be able to study."

"Not to mention that it interferes with my leadership of the school," Umbridge cut in.

"That goes without saying," Snape said when Minerva couldn't bring herself to respond.

"Well now, I think I'll just take this up to my office," Dolores said, running the silvery grey material between her fingers. "I'm certain I'll have the cooperation of all the teachers in stripping it down and determining its owner."

Minerva made no response to such a ludicrous assumption. If the teachers' lack of assistance with the Weasley twins' fireworks and other pranks hadn't taught her, nothing would. Snape must have been thinking the same thing because he was as close to hiding a smile as she'd ever seen him.

Or perhaps that wasn't the source of his amusement at all. His next words completely floored her.

"There is no need to strip it down," Snape said. "That cloak belongs to Harry Potter."

Stolen Memories

Chapter 8 of 9

Could Professor Umbridge finally have the ammunition she needs to get rid of Harry?

"Harry Potter." Dolores positively tasted the boy's name as she said it. "Hiding an Invisibility Cloak in violation of the Educational Decrees. Well, well, well. It seems that the Minister and I will be able to see him expelled after all." Her pointy little teeth gleamed in the sputtering torchlight. "Cornelius will be delighted when I tell him."

"I'm sure he will," Minerva said dryly. As Dolores looked down to caress the silvery-grey fabric of the Invisibility Cloak once again, Minerva sent a narrow-eyed glare across at Snape. They had never been friends, but as colleagues and fellow members of the Order of the Phoenix there had been a certain measure of trust between them, even with Snape's suspicious past. She'd never quite believed that he would betray Harry, despite the enmity between the two of them.

Severus didn't bother to respond to the venom in her gaze, or even to acknowledge that it was there at all. Instead, he trained his attention on the gloating Headmistress.

Dolores, gleefully preoccupied with Harry's cloak, didn't even see it coming. Snape fished inside his robes for his wand and, pointing it at her, whispered an incantation. The effect on the Headmistress was immediate. She swayed on her feet and grabbed at the wall, the cloak slipping unheeded through her fingers. Staggering, she slid unceremoniously down the wall, her fingernails scraping against the stone. She landed on her backside with a heavy bump.

"Confundus Charm," Snape explained tersely to Minerva, slipping his wand back inside his robes. "You'd better get rid of that cloak now if you wish to save your precious Potter from expulsion."

Minerva bent down and scooped up the cloak from where it lay crumpled beside the Headmistress. "I'll take that, Dolores," she murmured with smug satisfaction. "It seems that you won't thwart Harry's ambition to become an Auror quite so easily. You won't be able to justify expelling him without proof, will you?"

"We'll have to be quick," Snape noted, casting a professional eye over the dazed Headmistress. He retrieved the Veritaserum antidote. Pouring a small measure of it into a glass, he held it up to the dazed Headmistress's mouth. "Drink this," he instructed. "It will help you feel better."

His actions made sense. If, when the confusion wore off, Dolores realised she was forced to be absolutely truthful, the realisation that she had been drugged was almost an inevitable connection. Minerva nodded approvingly at Snape's quick thinking.

Dolores gulped down the liquid obediently, her eyes vacant.

"We'll need to modify her memory too," Minerva decided. "If she realises how much she has revealed to us, she will do everything in her power to remove us from our positions."

"I almost wish someone would modify *mine*," Snape snorted. "The image of that woman with the Minister of Magic is enough to turn me off my food for the rest of the school year."

Privately, Minerva agreed with him, although she never would have come out and said so. "Best to get our friends out of here first," she mused. Carefully, she avoided using Harry and Sirius's names. One never knew when a memory modification might work imperfectly. It was imperative that Dolores never even suspected either of them had been there.

"Please do," Snape growled. He glared around the shambles of his office. When he spoke again, his voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Delightful as this visit has been, I *do* have work to do. This is my office, not the Great Hall or even the Hogwarts Duelling Club and Social Hour. You all may leave."

Minerva ground her teeth at Snape's hostility and, with difficulty, bit back a retort. "If you'd be so kind as to distract her," she said, nodding towards the bemused Headmistress. "I'll get our friends out of here"

Snape fixed Minerva with one of the most disgusted looks in his repertoire, but he did reach down and roughly turn Professor Umbridge about so that she was facing away from the door. "Do it quickly." His words were more of a command than a request, but in the interest of parting him from two of his greatest adversaries, Minerva ignored his tone.

It only took a brief moment to turn Harry and Sirius back to their previous forms. "Sirius," Minerva told the dog quietly, "change back and get yourself and Harry out of here. There isn't much time."

The dog became man in one fluid blur of motion. He still looked bruised and sore, but he was in much better shape than Harry, whose face was pale and who was beginning to sway on his feet.

Sirius wrapped his arm around Harry, allowing the boy to lean on him and support his weight, wasting no time in steering him towards the door. "What happened?" he whispered, staring at the huddled form of the Headmistress.

"There will be time for explanations later," Minerva said reprovingly. "Take the cloak and get Harry up to the hospital wing. We'll take care of Professor Umbridge."

"Professor McGonagall?"

Minerva looked over at Harry, enquiringly.

"Thank you."

She allowed herself a thin-lipped smile. "It might be better if you kept to your dormitory at night, Potter," she said.

Harry inclined his head. He and Minerva locked gazes, both of them aware that his response was not an assent. She offered him another of those half-smiles and did not insist. She judged it wiser not to push him into promises that he would inevitably break.

"Good night," she said. "I hope to hear tomorrow from Madam Pomfrey that you are making an excellent recovery."

"Yes, Professor," Harry responded, his voice reflecting the weariness that was becoming increasingly evident in his face.

"Come on Harry," Sirius urged. "Let's go."

"Mr. Filch may be about," Minerva reminded them, handing them Harry's cloak. "Do not allow him to see you."

Sirius tossed her a mischievous grin as he helped Harry outside. With difficulty, Minerva suppressed a reproving sniff. The man was every bit as incorrigible as he had been as a student. Some boys never grew up.

"If the touching farewells are over, perhaps we can get back to business," Snape sneered. "The Headmistress will not stay so delightfully confused all night."

Minerva once again centred her attention on Dolores. The woman hadn't moved since Snape had turned her around. Eyeing the potions professor suspiciously, she noted, "That Confundus Charm was rather intense, wasn't it? Usually people can at least walk afterwards."

"She irritated me," Severus responded smoothly. There was a vindictive gleam in his eye as he contemplated the bemused Headmistress. He did not elaborate further.

"It's probably best that she never remembers being here at all," Minerva mused. "This is more your field than mine, Severus. Can you remove all recollection of having encountered us tonight?"

"Quite simply," Snape responded arrogantly. If he was flattered by Minerva's compliment, he did not let it show.

He approached the Headmistress. She was still sitting amongst all the debris on the ground, her limbs akimbo. Crouching down beside her and easily fending off her attempts to stop him, he touched his wand to her head. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment. A whispered word sufficed for the incantation, and then he was drawing a silvery substance away from her head with the wand. "A jar, if you please, Professor. You will find several in the intact cupboard against the wall."

As she retrieved the requested object, Minerva watched Snape curiously. She'd never even considered using this spell on another person. The process was almost exactly like removing memories for a Pensieve, and yet Minerva noted the look of heightened concentration on Snape's face. The wand movement was different too. Instead of drawing the memories out gracefully in one easy motion, Severus's wand moved back and forth and fractionally in and out as he withdrew it, much like Hagrid used his fishing line to draw in fish. Professor Umbridge groaned.

"Is it hurting her?" Minerva demanded.

"The discomfort is slight," Snape responded in a bored, uncaring tone. "Far less than that which she has caused your students during detention."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Minerva snapped, glaring at him.

"Perhaps you should ask them," Snape responded smoothly. "Currently, I am performing a rather difficult task and would appreciate it if you would allow me to give it my

full attention. Have you got that jar handy?"

Grinding her teeth, Minerva passed it over. She watched silently as he touched the rim of the jar with his wand and allowed the silvery substance to flow down inside it. He peered into the jar, stirring the contents with his wand and staring intensely at the result. Finally, he nodded in satisfaction. "Crude, but it will suffice," he muttered. He turned and, producing a key from within his robes, unlocked a drawer in the cupboard. He slipped the memory jar inside and locked the drawer again.

"You had better remove her from this room before the disorientation wears off," Snape suggested shortly. "I have no wish to perform that spell again tonight."

Minerva had no desire to see it again either. The whole process had made her feel uneasy and a little unclean. She glanced at the locked cupboard drawer. "What do you intend to do with the memory?" she asked him.

"It may become useful," Snape said curtly. "One should never discard anything until they know it will not be of service to them.

Just then, Dolores mumbled incoherently.

"Time is short," Severus said pointedly.

Minerva nodded curtly and conjured up a stretcher. She levitated the almost inert form of Dolores onto it and sent it floating out of the door. "Do you require assistance to restore your office to order?" she asked Severus.

The potions professor cast her a withering look. "Hardly," he responded ungraciously. He glared around at the shambles of his office and, brandishing his wand, he muttered, "*Reparo*." As he pointed the wand at the glass on the floor, it flew back together to form the jars which had lined the walls in the room. Disgustedly, he cast his eyes over the fluid and other debris that still littered the floor. "Some of these ingredients will be salvageable," he muttered darkly. "*Some*, however, will not. This collection took years to assemble."

"I am sure Albus will be happy to use the resources at his disposal to assist you in replenishing your stocks when he is reinstated," Minerva responded. "Good night, Severus."

Snape grunted, whether at the prospect of restocking his supply, at the idea of Dumbledore returning, or at her farewell, Minerva did not know. He did not deign to look up as she left.

With time of the essence, Minerva set a quick pace, the stretcher skimming before her. She hastened towards Umbridge's quarters, her feet positively flying over the stone floor.

So preoccupied was she by the urgency of reaching her destination that she only had a moment's warning before Filch rounded the corner. With no time to come up with a better option, she sent the stretcher flying into one of the nearby unused classrooms.

Filch was covered in swamp water and was looking more disgruntled than usual. "She promised me he'd be expelled," he wheezed darkly to himself as he shuffled along the corridor. "As if I don't have enough work cleaning up after those filthy hooligans, I have to contend with that miserable poltergeist as well."

"Good evening, Argus," Minerva said repressively.

Filch looked up, startled to see her there. "Professor," he responded promptly. "That nasty Peeves has been up to his old tricks again. He's been worse than usual tonight, exploding that swamp. There's mess everywhere! It took me hours to clean it."

Minerva managed to hide a smile. The distraction had been more successful than she could have hoped. "Terrible," she commiserated. "You've more than earned your rest tonight, Argus. Perhaps it's time you were in bed."

"More than time, Professor," he responded. "Good night then."

"Good night, Argus."

Suddenly, there was a loud thump from the classroom in which Minerva had stored Dolores. "What was that?" Filch demanded. "More student pranks?"

He shuffled wheezily towards the classroom, but Minerva was quicker. A glance inside revealed Dolores staggering in a drunken manner towards the door. The stretcher hovered behind her. Hastily, Minerva vanished it before Filch saw it and became suspicious.

"Dolores, are you okay?" Minerva asked, with as much real concern as faked surprise.

"Headmistress!" Filch yelled, looking stunned. "What happened to you?"

Dolores tottered towards them. She was shaking her head as if trying to clear it. Her expression was still bemused. She blinked at Filch as if trying to focus her eyes.

"She seems to have fallen foul of a spell," Minerva noted in a professional manner. It was, after all, obvious.

"But how?" Filch demanded, staring at the Headmistress fiercely as though the answer might be found tattooed across her forehead. "Who would dare to attack her?"

"Perhaps it wasn't an attack at all," Minerva suggested equably. "Even Albus admitted he didn't know all of the castle's secrets. Remember what happened to Montague. Everybody thought he'd been the victim of some powerful dark magic, only to discover that he was in one of the fourth floor toilets."

"Those sneaking students have been at it again!" Filch insisted. "There must be an investigation!"

"And there will be," Minerva assured him soothingly. "However, our first priority must be the Headmistress's health."

"Of course," Filch wheezed, frowning. "We'll take her to the hospital wing, and then, with your permission, Professor, I will look into the matter."

Umbridge in the hospital wing and Filch investigating a possible attack were the two last things that Minerva needed right then. "You are very kind, Argus," she said, "but I believe that such an investigation had better be headed by me," she paused, "and of course, the Headmistress, when she recovers."

"Of course, Professor," Argus responded, "and when you catch the culprits, it will be my pleasure to administer their punishment." Minerva shuddered at the glee in his voice.

"It's very kind of you to offer, Argus," she said. "But I believe I can handle it."

Filch looked very disappointed, muttering, "I've polished all the whips and chains."

"I'm certain they will not be required," Minerva responded reprovingly, not bothering to hide her distaste.

With Filch assisting her to support Dolores, they made their way haltingly up to the hospital wing. Minerva could only hope that Harry was well out of sight and that Sirius had made his escape before they arrived.

Deception

Chapter 9 of 9

Will Sirius get Harry to the hospital wing in time to save him? And how will they avoid being discovered by Dolores Umbridge or Filch?

At first, despite his obvious discomfort, Harry did not put much weight on Sirius's arm. Sirius admired his courage. He was like his father in more ways than he could possibly realise. James would not have admitted weakness either; not unless he thought it might have garnered him some sympathy from Lily.

As they ascended staircase after staircase, Harry's steps slowed noticeably, and he began to stumble. His breath began to come in short gasps, and when Sirius tightened his arm around him and took more of his weight, he did not protest.

"Not long now, Harry," Sirius encouraged him. He wished he could see Harry's face better, but by necessity, they were both covered by the Invisibility Cloak, and it obscured his view.

"I'm okay," Harry panted.

He was not, Sirius knew, but there was no hope for it but to continue ever upwards and to find Madam Pomfrey the instant they arrived. She would know what to do.

When they reached the second floor, Harry collapsed, dragging the cloak off them. Sirius only barely had time to break his fall, the arm around the boy supporting most of his weight.

"Sorry," Harry panted.

"It's fine," Sirius assured him. "We'll wait a few moments for you to catch your breath, and then we'll continue on."

"No," Harry protested. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said. There's not much time. You have to get out of here before you get caught."

"If you tell me to leave without you, I'm going to turn into Snuffles and bite you," Sirius said, allowing a smile to conceal his worry. "Surely you can do better than an old cliché like that."

Harry returned Sirius's smile with a feeble one of his own. "I'd never forgive myself if I was the reason you got sent back to Azkaban," he said. "Please, Sirius. Get out of here. Someone will find me and help me to the hospital wing."

"But perhaps they'll be too late to help you," Sirius pointed out. "At the very least there will be a lot of awkward questions to answer."

"I'll be okay," Harry assured him weakly.

"I'll carry you," Sirius decided, ignoring the assurance. "There's no use in arguing, Harry. I won't leave you here."

Before Harry could come up with any more arguments, Sirius bent down and hauled the boy up onto his shoulder. He barely managed to stifle the gasp of pain that the movement elicited. His bruised cheekbone screamed out its agony as he bent forward and Harry's foot bumped the ribs that Snape had so recently injured, sending a jolt of pain through them.

Harry had caught the cloak with the tips of his fingers. Somehow Sirius managed to pull it so it covered both of them again. "OK, hang in there, Harry," he said. "I'll get you there soon."

The journey to the hospital wing was pure agony. Every step Sirius took lit a fire in his ribs. He gritted his teeth, refusing to give his godson any indication of just how much pain he was in.

Just before they reached the third floor landing, they had a bit of a scare. Filch, drenched in swamp water, shuffled down the stairs past them. Sirius had to press against the banisters to avoid being run into. Harry couldn't suppress a soft groan, and Filch looked around wildly.

"Who's there?" the caretaker demanded wheezily. "Students are not to be out of bed at this hour."

Neither Harry nor Sirius made another sound.

Filch climbed back up the stairs to the landing and prowled about, opening doors and peering inside. "I know you're hiding here somewhere," he wheezed. "When I find you, you'll be very sorry."

Sirius waited until the caretaker's attention was wholly occupied in searching one of the nearby rooms, and then he carefully ascended the last few remaining stairs to the third floor. It took a considerable effort to move silently with Harry draped heavily over his shoulder, but Sirius had spent years perfecting the art of sneaking past Filch. Although it felt like an eternity, it could only have been minutes until he was easing himself through the doors of the hospital wing.

His shoulders and back were throbbing painfully, and his ribs ached so badly that he could hardly concentrate, but Sirius refused to stop until he had laid Harry on one of the white-sheeted beds. Pausing to catch his breath, he was relieved to note that the only patients in the room were asleep. He had been in so much pain that he'd momentarily forgotten that the room might not have been empty. He had no doubt that even the sickest of students would have remembered the sudden appearance out of thin air of a student and a known fugitive.

Harry lay barely conscious. As Sirius snuck back to the door to watch Filch give up the chase and begin back down the stairs, he contemplated his latest dilemma. He would have to alert Madam Pomfrey immediately, but doing so would reveal his presence in the castle. He had no hesitation in sacrificing his freedom for Harry's life, but once back in Azkaban, he would be powerless to protect his godson against Snape and his other enemies.

He had just decided to tear through the ward as Snuffles that was sure to bring the nurse when the woman solved the problem for him. She slipped into the ward holding a medicine tray and headed over to the beds to check on her patients. Hastily, Sirius pulled the Invisibility Cloak back around himself and slipped back into a corner of the room. No matter what anyone said, he would not leave until he knew Harry was well taken care of.

Madam Pomfrey startled and almost dropped her tray when she caught sight of Harry on the bed. "Harry Potter, I declare," she said, tut-tutting as she bustled over. "Now what have you been up to this time? You get yourself into almost as much trouble as Professor Hagrid." Sniffing, she added, "However, at least you have the sense to

come and see me when you do. However did you get here in that state?"

From his vantage-point, Sirius hid a smile. Only Madam Pomfrey would have accepted Harry's appearance here at this time without wondering why he was up this late or where he had come from. He remembered more than one occasion when her willingness to accept the most transparent of explanations had served the Marauders well.

In moments, Madam Pomfrey had exposed the wound on Harry's chest and applied some purple-coloured ointment to it. Harry's groan cheered Sirius, an encouragement that he had not been too late. It was a marvel to watch the nurse at her work. She displayed not the slightest trace of indecision or worry as she dealt with Harry's condition. She even managed to coax his eyelids open and encourage him to swallow some medicine. The colour returned to his cheeks, his breathing became less laboured, and the pain-induced tightening of his face relaxed.

"Much better," Madam Pomfrey assured him as she pulled the blankets over him and tidied everything away. "We'll have you back in class in no time."

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing Harry on the way to recovery lightened his heart so much that the pain in his ribs and his cheek seemed no more than an irritation. It was time to go. Carefully, he eased himself out of his hiding place and stole towards the door, securely hidden from view by the Invisibility Cloak.

Moments before he reached it, it swung back open. Professor McGonagall slipped through, her brow creasing in a frown as she glanced around the room.

Madam Pomfrey looked up from attending to one of the other patients. "Oh, Professor," she greeted. "I was going to come and see you first thing in the morning. I found Harry Potter in here, lying on one of the beds in an awful state. I'm afraid he will be unable to attend classes tomorrow."

Minerva nodded tersely. "We need to conceal him, Poppy," she said quietly. "Argus is bringing Professor Umbridge in. She is confused and disoriented. He believes that she has been attacked, but she has merely fallen foul of a Confundus Charm. I need you to keep Potter out of her sight and to conceal the true nature of her illness from Argus and from Dolores herself when she recovers. Will you do this for me?"

For a moment, the nurse and the Transfiguration professor stared at each other. For the first time since he'd arrived, Sirius could see indecision in Madam Pomfrey's expression. After what seemed to be an agonisingly long time, she nodded and turned to draw the privacy curtain around Harry's bed.

Minerva relaxed, looking so relieved that Sirius realised what a gamble she must have just taken. "Thank you, Poppy," she said. "We are in your debt."

Madam Pomfrey merely nodded. "Has Professor Umbridge injured herself?" she asked.

"No," Minerva assured her. "Argus and I have taken care that she would not stumble in her confused state. I had better return for her."

As Minerva left, Madam Pomfrey returned to her patients, feeling their foreheads, checking their colour and tucking them in. Sirius remained behind the door. Before he left he wanted to see how this new twist would play out. He couldn't have imagined that Professor McGonagall would put Harry in danger by leading that woman here. How could she take such a risk?

Several minutes later, the double doors opened once more and Professor Umbridge struggled through, supported by Minerva and Filch. Madam Pomfrey came forward to assist, leading the group to the bed furthest away from that in which Harry lay.

"She's been attacked," Filch exclaimed. "We've got to find out what's been done to her so that we know who to blame for this!"

"Attacked?" Madam Pomfrey repeated, exchanging a look with Minerva, who shook her head slightly. "I shall be very thorough in my examination and treatment, I assure you, Mr. Filch."

Filch looked so relieved that Sirius entertained the notion that perhaps the relationship between Minerva and Dumbledore was not the only romance blossoming in the Hogwarts staffroom.

"Perhaps you should attend to your duties, Mr. Filch," Madam Pomfrey suggested firmly.

Filch grumbled under his breath but took the hint, shuffling out the door.

"Now, let me have a look at you," the nurse said, turning to Professor Umbridge and examining her carefully. "Yes," she said, glancing at Minerva, "I see what you mean, Professor. She is in no danger, except to herself if she wanders off or falls." She glanced over to the screened bed where Harry was concealed.

"I suggest a sleeping draught," she decided. "By the time it wears off, she'll be herself again."

"Does she really need to sleep it off here?" Minerva asked sharply.

"Not if someone were to check in on her from time to time," Madam Pomfrey mused.

"I'll have one of the house-elves sit with her and inform you if anything changes," Minerva decided. "Will that be sufficient, Poppy?"

"It should be," Madam Pomfrey responded, glancing once again at the bed that contained Harry. "You understand that if her condition deteriorates, or if anything goes amiss, I *will* have to keep her here?"

"Of course, Poppy," Minerva agreed. "I wouldn't expect any less of you."

A fitting job for a house-elf, Sirius mused, watching Minerva and Poppy guide Umbridge out of the ward. Once they were safely gone, he snuck back over to Harry's bed, carefully checking that the other patients were asleep before pulling back the privacy curtain and slipping in.

Pulling the cloak off himself, he approached the bed and patted Harry's arm gently. "I have to go now," he told the boy. "You make sure you get better. Minerva will let me know how you are, and I'll be in touch as soon as I can."

Harry opened his eyes drowsily. "Bye, Sirius," he muttered thickly. "It was good to see you." His eyes fluttered closed once more.

Sirius smiled. He stood there longer than he should have, just watching Harry sleep. Finally, he slipped out of the ward under cover of the cloak and made his way as silently as possible to the Headmistress's office. Filch seemed to have finally gone to bed, or at least, to be patrolling another part of the castle, because Sirius was able to reach his destination without encountering either him or his cat.

The door of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor's office opened easily with the knife that Sirius carried the twin of one he had given Harry two Christmases ago. Pulling the cloak off himself, he reached for the box of floo powder near the fire and nearly spilt it everywhere when a voice interrupted him.

"I wondered if you'd left yet," Professor McGonagall said. She was sitting at a lace-covered table. She certainly hadn't been there a moment before *This* time he hadn't forgotten to check before he revealed himself.

It took a moment for Sirius to realise what had happened, and when he did, he could have kicked himself for his stupidity. Of course. Minerva had used his own trick against him, lurking in her animagus form.

"I was just going now," Sirius said, his tone tight. "That was dangerous, bringing Umbridge to the hospital wing."

"I had no choice," Minerva responded. "Argus discovered her. It would have looked very suspicious if I had failed to make sure that she had the proper treatment. Neither

you nor Harry would have benefited by the close scrutiny that would have certainly followed."

"Nor you, nor Snape," Sirius pointed out bitterly.

"None of us would have," Minerva agreed. "But now she is fast asleep in her bed, and by tomorrow, the whole thing will seem like a dream."

"Filch will remember," Sirius reminded her.

"Severus has promised to take care of that," Minerva said. She paused, eyeing him thoughtfully and then continued, "In return for a service from you."

"From me!" Sirius sputtered. "I wouldn't spit on him if he were on fire. Are you forgetting what happened between us tonight? He's the reason that Harry's lying in the hospital wing!"

"That was just as much your fault as his, Sirius Black," Minerva responded sternly.

"If he weren't such a snivelling "

"Sirius, this serves no purpose. You and Harry need Argus's silence as much as we do."

Sirius glared at her. Minerva must know how much the request to assist Snape galled her. "What does he want?" he gritted out.

"Your silence," Minerva replied. "You forced his secrets from him."

"I don't think so!" Sirius growled. "After all these years, *finally* have something over that cowardly excuse for a human being. *Finally* I'll be able to stop him torturing Harry."

"Harry is safe," Minerva said shortly. "Do you think that I would fail to protect any of my students from harm?"

"He's been tormenting him for years!" Sirius snapped. "He's mean and petty, and he's caused Harry more trouble "

"And one word from him, one hint that you were here in the castle, and you'll have the Ministry on your back again," Minerva pointed out. "Do you think like it? I don't want your secret to 'accidentally' slip out like Remus's did. Harry's in every bit as much danger. Severus could as easily reveal that Harry's hiding your location. Do you want your godson subjected to that?"

Sirius said nothing. She was right of course, but the whole thing set his stomach churning in distaste. He felt so disheartened. He hadn't succeeded in convincing Snape to recommence Harry's Occlumency lessons, and now he couldn't even blackmail the man into treating his godson better. Just what had his visit achieved?

"No," he admitted. "I don't."

"I told him that you would keep your word to me, if you gave it," Minerva said. "Don't let me down, Sirius Black."

"Very well, I give you my word," he grumbled sullenly. "Are you happy now?"

"Not quite," Minerva said. She paused, as though her next words were harder to say. "I need you to keep my secret too."

Sirius just eyed her, allowing his frustration to show on his face.

"You tricked me, Sirius," she said. "You had no right to slip that Veritaserum into my drink. I trusted you."

Sirius said nothing. He was still angry with her, still furious that she'd risked exposing Harry by taking Umbridge to the hospital wing, that she had ruined his revenge on Snape. Just then, he hated her.

"Very well," Minerva said, sighing. "I cannot force you to do as I ask. I will not hold you hostage as Severus did. You had better leave before you are discovered here."

Sirius wordlessly handed her the Invisibility Cloak. "Would you keep that safe for Harry?" he asked.

"Of course," Minerva said. Her voice was distant. She did not look at him. Instead, she got up from the straight-backed chair and walked towards the door of the office. "I will see you shortly, I'm sure," she said.

"Good night, Minerva," Sirius replied. He, too, avoided her eyes. He felt slightly uneasy. Anger at himself fuelled his rage at her. She'd rescued him from Severus, and he knew he should be grateful, but he couldn't bring himself to say the words that would ease her mind. Instead, he simply threw a pinch of the Floo powder into the fire and vanished into the emerald green flames.

Minerva never really knew if Sirius had said anything to Dumbledore. The Headmaster was positively inscrutable. When he returned to Hogwarts, his manner of warm respect towards her remained unchanged. Desperately, she wished that that was because he had no idea how she felt about him. It would have been unbearable if Sirius had revealed her secret to him and he just hadn't cared enough to do anything about it.

Snape was as good as his word. Filch's only memories of the night seemed to be of endlessly cleaning swamp water. He certainly never launched his investigation into the 'attack' on the Headmistress, and Dolores herself continued on as if nothing had happened.

Harry was discharged from the hospital wing the next evening. Fortunately, he had no Defence Against the Dark Arts class scheduled for the day he was absent, and the rest of the teachers calmly accepted Minerva's excuses for him. None of *them* chose to enlighten the Headmistress that he'd missed classes and so she never had cause to look into the cause of his injuries.

Minerva's most enduring regret from that night was that she had never afterwards found the time to wrest the bottled memory from Snape. Even whilst he still taught at Hogwarts, she hadn't really trusted him, but in the following days and months, every time she determined to confront him about it something came up which seemed much more urgent. Over time she completely forgot that Severus possessed hard evidence of some of Dolores's most guarded secrets. If she'd only known that he would later use them to gain a spy for the Death Eaters within the Ministry, one whose powers of ingratiation permitted her access to key policy decisions, she would have never have allowed him to keep it. That was a mistake Minerva regretted until the end of her life.