

# Harry Potter and the Heirs of Slytherin

*by Fawkes\_07*

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## 1: The Calm

*Chapter 1 of 50*

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For the first time in his life, Harry Potter felt a measure of contentment at his aunt and uncle's house at Number 4, Privet Drive.

To say he *was* content would have been far overstating the matter; this house was never meant to be his home and could never feel like one, not with all the bitter memories it held. But for the first time, he didn't feel imprisoned by the spotlessly clean walls, or suffocated by the weight of contempt from his relatives.

He'd been most reluctant to return to the Dursley's house, to be sure. After the funeral services for Dumbledore, he wanted only to return to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and spend a few days grieving in private, to be interrupted only when he chose to seek out his friends, or other wizards in the Order. They would be mourning as well, and would understand Harry's need for both the peace of solitude and the distraction of conversation. So when Mad-Eye Moody asked him whether he planned to take the Hogwarts Express back to London, or be escorted straight to Little Whinging by a cadre of wizards on broomsticks, Harry's eyes had bugged out almost as far as Moody's.

"You can't possibly think I'm going back there?!" Harry sputtered, when he found his tongue again.

"Oh, I know you're going back there, Potter, it's the safest place and it's what's got to be done."

Harry couldn't reply; he felt as though a steel blade had slid into his chest. He looked quickly to the other wizards and witches within hearing distance. Professor McGonagall, her eyes still red from the funeral, gave him a look of deep sympathy, but nonetheless inclined her head toward Moody and nodded in support. Arthur Weasley stared at his shoes; he appeared to have already had this discussion with Moody and had been forced to concede defeat. Hermione bit her lip and frowned, glancing back and forth between Moody and Harry. Only Ron had the decency to look utterly flabbergasted by the notion that Harry should be cast out of the wizarding community at such an hour of pain and need, back to the Dursleys and their own brand of misery.

In the end, though, Hermione had convinced him that this was necessary. "Yes, that house is yours. Everyone knows you are going to be living in it eventually; that's why the Order are working so hard to fortify it for defense--not to mention cleaning out the mess. We're all behind that, Harry. But you know very well that until you turn seventeen, the safest place in the world for you is with your relatives. Now more than ever, Harry, you need to play it safe every chance you get."

"Rubbish, Hermione!" said Harry. "I'm done with safety! I'm done with Hogwarts! I've only got one thing to do in this world, and that's to put an end to Voldemort."

Hermione flinched at the name, but, to Harry's satisfaction, it was merely out of habit; she no longer cringed or cowered like most of the wizarding community. "Oh, really?" she said sarcastically. "Without any rest, any plan, any idea where to even *start*, you're just going to go zipping off into the wilderness, hunt down You-Know-Who, and wipe him out singlehandedly? Are you planning to get a bloodhound to sniff him out? Going to raise up your hand and say 'Accio Horcruxes'?"

His silence gave Hermione all the time she needed to assemble her thoughts for the next round, and as much as he hated to admit it, there really wasn't anything intelligent he could say in response. "You know darn well you're in no position to storm off solo after Voldemort," she said, softer this time. "Harry, we all need to think this through and get it done right, not run around like a bunch of frightened mice in a maze."

"Fine!" Harry snapped in frustration. "Fine. I'll wait, I'll think, I'll plan. But I'm staying with you guys, *with* you this time. I'm not going to be stuck in a house full of Muggles while everyone else does all the planning."

Hermione threw up her hands. "Harry, I'll give you my word that you won't be left out. We'll send you owls and messengers and I'll even get a cell phone. I've already looked into them and I think all the wizards should start carrying them; I'm sure You-Know-Who hasn't the faintest idea how to use one," she said firmly, even as Harry shook his head defiantly. "We'll keep you up to date, I promise! Everyone just wants you to stay safe as long as you can."

"I'm safe at Sirius's house, I'll be surrounded by Order wizards day and night--" Harry began.

"Who will have to stay there and *baby-sit* for you the whole time!" said Hermione exasperatedly.

Harry stared at her with fists clenched, too angry to speak. Hermione realized that this had been a low blow, and her expression softened somewhat. "Harry...I'm sorry, that was a rotten thing to say. But you know what I mean! Once you move into Headquarters, you know that the Order is going to want to guard you day and night. Even if you don't want it *or need it*," she added hastily. "They're going to do it out of their own need to protect you, not because you want to be protected. And every wizard who is standing guard at your side is one less wizard that could be out there tracking down You-Know-Who. Think about it, Harry! Why take all those people out of commission just yet, when there's a place you can go where no one has to guard you?"

"No one *has* to guard me anywhere--" Harry began, but Hermione waved her hands dismissively again and cut him off.

"Fine, no one **has** to guard you, but they *will* anyway. Why can't you go to the one place where you are 100% safe, just for a few weeks, Harry, so that everyone can stay focused?"

"Because it stinks!" shouted Harry. "I don't want to go back there ever again! I hate it!"

Hermione sighed. "I know, Harry. I know this isn't asking you to go have a hot-fudge sundae. No one wants you to be with those awful people; we'd all rather have you close by. Moody and Ron's dad had a royal row over it; I thought they were going to get their wands out toward the end. Mr. Weasley wants to take you to the Burrow. Lupin was totally excited about you staying with him at Headquarters. Hagrid even wanted you to move into his place so you could stay on the Hogwarts grounds." Harry's brows raised upon hearing the last bit; although Aunt Petunia fed him the barest of scraps, even her grudging meals would certainly be better than the overcooked (but plentiful) fare in Hagrid's cabin.

Hermione continued, "But it all comes back to the same thing, Harry: you're in the greatest danger ever, now, and as long as you have a place of safety, it's just insane not to use it. That was your mother's gift to you, Harry, her legacy. Once you come of age, there may not be a single place on Earth that will be safe for you. You may never be able to rest again until...until...a long time."

Hermione's eyes were becoming misty. Harry's stomach lurched as he realized he had no desire to see Hermione cry over the prospects of his future. And what she had said made sense; once the hunt began, he might not rest again until it was over, however long that would take. Maybe he should take some time to prepare for the task.

Harry eventually conceded, very bitterly, to return to Privet Drive until he came of age and the protections set on that house were lifted. He wished he could make Number Four the new Headquarters, voicing his frustrations that the Order wasn't taking advantage of the "protections" bequeathed upon the Dursleys' home, but no one would think of it. "That house belongs to your uncle, Harry," said Remus Lupin, as they sat in the Gryffindor common room on the last night of the term. "Even if they welcomed us," he went on as Harry snorted derisively, "we could hardly have people Apparating, and owls zipping around all the time, in a Muggle neighborhood like that."

"You do it at Number Twelve," said Harry.

"Come on, Harry, you know there's a difference. Most of that street is empty and the rest of them are too busy hiding behind their own curtains to notice. But those people--" Lupin raised his hands up in a very good mimicry of a Muggle peering through binoculars, "--they can't seem to get enough of snooping at their neighbors. Besides, that's not the point. We're not wanted there, Harry, and that's that."

"I'm not wanted there either, but you send me there anyway!" said Harry sourly.

"Ah, but you're **family**," smiled Lupin with a twinkle in his eye. "They have to take you whether they want you or not!"

Harry sighed. "So I go have a spa vacation at my uncle's house while everyone else risks their lives. How heroic. I wonder how many people Voldemort will kill while I'm sitting around being nice and safe on Privet Drive?"

Lupin furrowed his brow a little, then smiled wanly again. "Harry. You're preparing yourself for a challenge that none of us could take on. We're all glad you have a safe sanctuary for the next few weeks. No one thinks you're running off to lounge about, watching that picture box thing while we all toil away in danger. Because we all know you're going to step up when the time comes--and believe me, we're all going to be working round the clock to make sure that time comes as quickly as possible."

Lupin leaned back in his chair and looked at Harry with the same comprehending sadness that Hermione had shown earlier, although without tears in his eyes. Harry frowned a moment, looked down at the tabletop, then up again. "But I don't want to be safe if my friends are in danger."

Lupin sighed. "I think, Harry," he said slowly, "that if I had a place to go, where I knew I was beyond Voldemort's reach, I would be torn too--it does seem selfish to protect yourself and leave your friends to fend for themselves. But maybe you can think of it this way: A coward would do that right off the cuff, without giving it a second thought, because that selfishness and fear is exactly what *makes* him a coward. The fact that you don't want to do it, that your instincts are to reject safety and stand by your friends, that's proof that you're no coward."

"So, hiding from danger isn't cowardly, as long as do it for the right reasons?" Harry snarled sarcastically. To his surprise, Lupin sat up and slammed his fist to the table, causing every head in the common room to turn toward them.

"Yes, Harry. Choosing a safe place to get ready for the hardest task of your life is not cowardice," Lupin said, not loudly, but since the common room had gone dead silent, it rang out forcefully. Lupin noticed the silence and glanced around the room at all the staring faces. He lowered his voice. "You can be resentful and make yourself miserable, convince yourself that everyone thinks you're a coward. Or you can accept the circumstances and use them to your fullest advantage. You have that *choice*, Harry," he said softly. "Maybe you're only doing this because we're all making you, but now that you're doing it, you can choose how to feel about it. I think you'd be a lot happier if you tell yourself this is an opportunity, instead of telling yourself you're running away."

And so Harry set off on the Hogwarts Express the next morning with the remaining students, knowing that a brigade of Aurors was watching the train from both land and air, with a newfound determination to make something out of the next few weeks. He parted from Ron and Hermione at King's Cross Station with many assurances that the summer would be over in a flash. Hermione met her parents on the Muggle platform, returned to slip Harry a small gift, and parted with a quick hug and a promise to talk to him very soon. Fred Weasley came alone to fetch Ron from the station; he tried to invite Harry to their joke shop on Diagon Alley for the afternoon, but Harry declined.

Harry was only mildly surprised that his uncle was not at the station to meet him. Tonks had been assigned inside King's Cross to guard Harry's arrival; the two of them spent an enjoyable hour sitting on a bench and hiding behind a Muggle newspaper, peeking around it at passers-by. Tonks would attempt to copy their faces, with comical results. It finally became obvious that the Dursleys were simply not coming to pick up Harry. Tonks and Harry slipped behind an unused ticket counter, where she took Harry's hand and Apparated them both straight into the Dursleys' kitchen, right in the middle of supper. This, of course, nearly sent Uncle Vernon into an apoplectic fit.

Harry neither heard, nor cared to hear, the ensuing discussion between Tonks and his relatives. Their petty gripes and idiotic priorities were intolerable to his ears anymore. He hauled his trunk and Hedwig's cage to the stairwell, lugged them up to his room one by one (noting with dull resignation that his bedroom had been converted into a storage/giftwrapping room over the past year), and simply shut the door and collapsed on the bed. Although the sounds of argument in the kitchen went on and on, he only made out a few words when he opened the door in response to a sharp tapping. A plate, piled high with food, was hovering in the hallway, while a fork and knife were busily drumming their handles on the door. He could hear angry, incoherent grunts from Uncle Vernon coming from the living room; he sounded as though he'd been gagged (Tonks had, in fact, given up and sealed his mouth shut within the first few minutes of their discussion). From the kitchen, he could hear Tonks saying "...this is your own sister's son, your kin, your blood..." He shut the door as soon as his dinner had scuttled into the room, the flatware performing a bright little riff on the desk before settling down.

The next morning, he slept in quite late and sauntered downstairs to find the house empty. He was surprised to find that a bowl of cereal and some bread and jam had been left on the table at his usual chair. He considered the possibility that it might be poisoned, then chuckled at the thought that Mad-Eye Moody would be proud of him for suspecting it. Harry knew real murderers; Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were, in a nutshell, too cowardly to try to harm him.

And so the tone was set for Harry's stay on Privet Drive. Harry essentially ignored his relatives, remaining in his room most of the time. Meals were shoved regularly through the cat flap in his bedroom door, and were consistently of ample quantity. Harry couldn't remember ever feeling so well-fed here. He wondered sometimes exactly how Tonks had succeeded in getting that message through his aunt's thick head, when so many other wizards had tried and failed. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia merely turned their backs when Harry did come downstairs, without any glares, harrumphs, or other signs of recognition. Harry didn't even mind the fact that Dudley met his gaze on occasion, because the flash of pure terror in Dudley's eyes gave him a perverse sort of thrill.

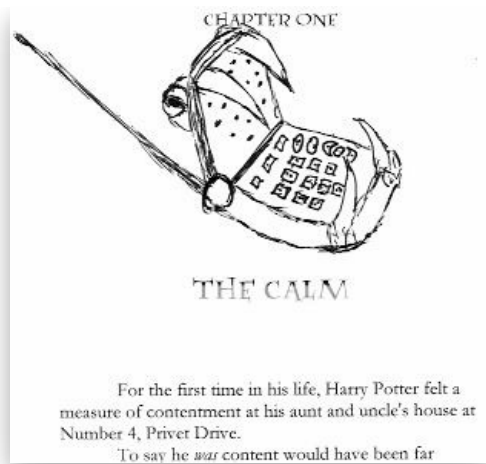
With peace and quiet, a full belly, and the knowledge that he was secure, Harry soon had to admit that his friends had been correct. He was amazed by the amount of time he simply slept, dreamless; it was as though his body had taken over his will and forced him to rest and renew himself.

On the third day, Harry was awakened by an odd ringing sound. At first he thought it must be some new game of Dudley's; it had that electronic, chirping quality of a Muggle device. He ignored it, but after rolling over in his bed, he realized that the noise was definitely coming from within his room. Harry sat up and leaned around, triangulating on the sound, then picked up his Hogwarts robes from their heap at the foot of the bed. More puzzled than alarmed, he shook the robe and realized that the source of the sound was in a pocket. Suddenly recalling Hermione's parting gift on the platform at King's Cross, Harry fished out the little package, which warbled cheerfully at him as he unrolled the tissue paper wrapping.

Harry stared at the little device for a moment, utterly baffled. He'd never seen anything like it. By its incessant ringing, he deduced that it was a telephone, but it looked nothing like the Dursleys' rotary-dial model downstairs. He turned it over and around in his hand, a smooth, metal bar, anodized in Gryffindor red, but having no obvious telephonic features. After fiddling with it, he managed to undo some sort of unseen clasp, and the thing opened like a clamshell, but this only made matters worse! The inside was covered with buttons, some numbered, some bearing incomprehensible little arrows and symbols; he wondered if Hermione had made this herself for extra credit in Ancient Runes. For a brief, panicked moment, he supposed he might have to ask Dudley how to operate the dratted thing, but then he noticed that one of the buttons was labeled, "Talk." *That has to be a good sign*, he thought, and pressed it. The ringing stopped, but now, of course, he had no idea where to find the microphone to speak into.

"Harry?" came a tinny version of Hermione's voice from a tiny slit at the top of the device. "Are you there?"

Harry guessed that if that end was the listening portion, the bottom must be the talking side, and put the phone closer to his head (instinctively keeping it far enough away that, if it decided to chomp itself shut again, it wouldn't be able to bite him. Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class had given him an extraordinary sense of caution around anything that resembled jaws). "Hermione? I'm here. What on Earth IS this thing?"



Hermione laughed. "I told you, Harry, it's a cell phone, they're just the latest thing among the Muggles. You can carry it anywhere, it's not like the old telephones that had to be plugged into a wall. Isn't it cute? I hope red is OK, they come in all colors. I must tell you first off, Harry, that these have batteries in them that need to be charged--every night, you have to flip open the bottom end and plug the whole thing into a wall outlet. When it needs more electricity, it suddenly stops working, so if that happens, don't worry that something's happened to me, just plug it in the wall for a while."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Hermione, I'm actually kind of familiar with how batteries work." He could picture her pursing her lips and sniffing at his jab.

"Right, then. How are you, Harry?"

"Fine, actually. I'm really fine! The Dursleys are leaving me alone, and they're almost treating me like a human being, it's weird."

"Oh, that's good, Harry! I'm still with my parents, they just can't believe all that's happened. I'm going to stay here until the wedding, I think they're rather worried about me. And it's sort of hard to convince them I'll be all right, poor dears, they've been reading the *Prophet* too and are very frightened about the state of the Wizarding community. They've been mentioning some horrible bloke named Hitler, he sounds like the Muggle version of You-Know-Who."

"Wonderful. So nice to know that monsters aren't limited to Wizards," muttered Harry. "So...do you know what else is going on?" He was unwilling to ask about the Order directly, as he did not share Hermione's faith that these cell phones were safe from spying ears. Apparently she had decided not to risk it either, judging by her vague response.

"I know that people are working very hard to prepare...safe places, for the...ongoing work. The general feeling is that it's easier to forge outward if there's a...sort of fortress where people can regroup or fall back. And since it's pretty much certain that the, um, other side, has already been digging in *somewhere*, we felt we should too."

Harry nodded. "That sounds like a good plan. But is anyone--"

Hermione cut him off. "It's not really a good idea to discuss details, don't you think?"

Harry felt his hackles raise; once again, he was being cut off from the goings-on of the Order, despite promises to the contrary. "Yeah. I understand," he growled. "Why keep me up to date, after all?"

Hermione's voice dropped about twenty degrees. "Should I remind you that you're supposed to be RESTING?"

Harry nearly clicked the phone shut, but he didn't really want to stop talking to Hermione. He also didn't know if that would actually turn the thing off or not. Closing his eyes and forcing a deep breath, he finally spoke again. "All right, all right. At least tell me if everyone's OK."

"Yes, Harry, definitely. We were all worried that there might be a second strike after..." her voice shook, "you know. But everything's been quiet. We figure that You-Know-Who is trying to gather information, just like we are--figure out just how much damage that...last act actually caused, where the weakest points are now. You'll see it all in a few weeks, Harry. Just rest now, though, OK? Rest and get ready for...what comes next."

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry with a sigh. "I am, it's actually kind of nice. But it's a lot easier now that I know that...things aren't heating up out there."

"I understand, Harry," Hermione said warmly. "I really will tell you if things heat up. And you can call me, too--I've programmed this number into the speed dial, just hit the Memory button and then select it. Listen, I need to go now, my mum took the day off work to spend with me. Try not to let it ring so long next time. We'll talk again soon, OK?"

"Sure, OK," muttered Harry. "And Hermione?" He paused.

"Yes?"

"Thanks for doing this."

"You're welcome, Harry. I'm happy to do it. Take care."

The connection closed, and Harry took a good long look at the phone. He found a button labeled "Mem," which popped up a single phone number on the screen when pressed; that must be hers. There was no button labeled "Select," however, and he gingerly pressed several buttons before determining that the "Talk" button caused the phone to dial the number. Not wanting to bother Hermione, he punched "End" as soon as he realized it was placing the call. He next found the battery charger and plugged the unit into the wall. He shook his head, grinning at how an everyday Muggle object like this had become so foreign to him, then looked up at Hedwig. She was glaring through the bars of her cage with such an offended expression that he burst out laughing.

On his fifth day back, Harry awoke before noon--so early, in fact, that Aunt Petunia hadn't even delivered breakfast yet. Feeling alert and refreshed, he dressed in Muggle clothes and went downstairs to the kitchen, where his aunt was bustling about the stove in her bathrobe. He didn't want to startle Aunt Petunia, who did not turn around when he entered the room, but he felt a little ridiculous just saying "Good morning" under the circumstances. He settled for pulling out a chair with a loud scrape, which at least gave his aunt some warning that there was another living being in the kitchen, so when she did finally look up, she only suffered the shock of discovering that it was Harry. She jumped, nearly upsetting the pot of porridge she'd been cooking.

"You! Don't sneak up on people like that!"

"I wasn't sneaking," said Harry. "I just walked into the room. I'm allowed to walk around, aren't I?"

Aunt Petunia wrinkled her nose and turned back to her porridge. After an uncomfortable pause, she finally asked, "Wouldn't you rather have breakfast in your room?"

"No, I feel like a little change of scenery today. I hope you don't mind if I eat at the table, you know, like a regular sort of person."

She gave Harry a glare that almost made him change his mind, but he wasn't about to back down now, nor sit through another bowl of lukewarm porridge upstairs. He watched her ladle two bowls full, noticing that she didn't skimp on his serving as she'd always done. She brought the bowls to the table, placed one in front of Harry, and sat down across from him. Watching her scoop up the food quickly with her spoon, trying to finish and get away from him as soon as possible, he felt an unexpected pity for her. Without even thinking, he said, "Aunt Petunia, are you happy here?"

She stared at him, frozen, her spoon midway between bowl and mouth. He immediately regretted saying it, expecting her to bellow about his cheek at asking such a thing. Much to his surprise, she simply set down her spoon and looked at him. Another silent pause, this one equally uncomfortable but in an entirely different way, and then she spoke in a quiet, unconvincing voice. "I have everything I'm supposed to have--a lovely home, a husband, a strong son...of course I'm happy."

Just as Harry could hear the language hidden in the hisses of snakes, he heard the real truth in Aunt Petunia's reply, which was quite different from the meaning of the words she said. Without trying in any way, he found himself receiving a flood of thought and emotion from his aunt, rolling through his consciousness so rapidly that only the briefest impressions were recognizable. His mother, through Petunia's eyes--a kindhearted girl, Petunia's best friend, the only one who didn't tease her for being so shy. Suddenly Lily was gone, on a tremendous adventure in a huge castle like a princess, while Petunia stayed behind. His uncle, young and thin, standing in a doorway with a bouquet; the flowers, the seasons, the time of day all changing, but his was the only face that ever appeared at her door. Petunia's wedding day, filled not with love and passion, but a sense of relief and security. The birth of her child, the disappointment of wanting a sweet little girl, the deep resentment that Vernon only wanted sons and got one. The constant, exhausting effort of shoving thoughts like these far into the back of her psyche.

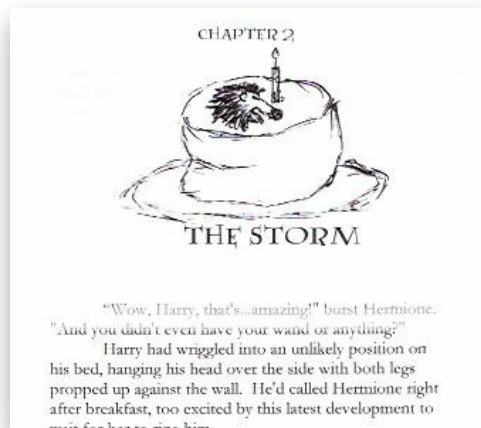
Harry's jaw fell open as he processed this rush of information; a lifetime had come to him in the time it took to say a single sentence. His aunt didn't even seem aware of the exchange, and stared at him, puzzled, finally turning around to see if something odd was happening behind her. At last she frowned and asked, "What's the matter with you, boy?"

Harry shuddered and mumbled, "Legilimency," before forcing himself to focus on his breakfast again.

## 2: The Storm

*Chapter 2 of 50*

Sixteen years of hatred manifest at Privet Drive just in time for Harry's birthday.



"Wow, Harry, that's... amazing!" burst Hermione. "And you didn't even have your wand or anything?"

Harry had wriggled into an unlikely position on his bed, hanging his head over the side with both legs propped up against the wall. He'd called Hermione right after breakfast, too excited by this latest development to wait for her to ring him. "Well, if I'd used magic," said Harry, "I'd have an owl from the Ministry by now, wouldn't I?"

Hermione laughed. "I'm not so sure, things are a little different around there now... but I suppose you're right, they wouldn't just overlook underage magic use. Although I don't think they'll be threatening to snap your wand over it anytime soon."

Harry laughed as well, though with a bitter edge. "Right. They'll wait until after I do them the Big Favor, and then they'll snap it."

They both gasped at Harry's words. Neither of them had ever considered how the Wizarding community would react, should Harry defeat Voldemort; Harry's cynical comment made them both snap to the realization that many would consider him the most powerful wizard alive, and would fear him for it. Hermione broke the silence with a quavering voice, "Harry..."

"Yeah, I know. I guess we've been so busy trying to get to that point, we've never actually thought about what would happen afterward."

Harry heaved a sigh and closed his eyes. The last thing he wanted to worry about right now was the schemes and spins of the Wizard media. But for years Harry had been sick and tired of whispers and stares, of conversations abruptly halting upon his appearance. He would defeat Voldemort or die in the attempt; if he lived, he'd much rather be lauded as a hero than be despised as the next He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But it wasn't like it was even up to him--if those hypocrites at the *Prophet* decided to run another smear campaign, what could he do about it? He'd already seen the kind of power they wielded, to twist, distort, lie--to turn people against him. The whole concept was making his stomach turn over.

Hermione must have sensed it, because she finally recovered her usual businesslike tone of voice. "Well, I think we should add that to the agenda too, now that it's come up. I think I would go right crazy if you somehow got turned into the bad guy for *this*, but we've certainly seen that the Ministry and the *Prophet* can't be trusted to keep their own bias out of the matter. My goodness, Harry, I'm really glad you said that. We definitely need to start considering this now, while the political climate is in your favor."

"Right," he said. "Whatever. Look, can we talk about something else?"

"Of course. Let's get back to that Legilimency, that's a very important breakthrough. Tell me just how it happened."

Harry recounted how he had simply been talking to his aunt when the wave of her innermost thoughts crashed over him.

"Well, now I wish I were back at Hogwarts, I've never studied this sort of thing. You know what, though, Harry, it reminds me of Trelawney. Didn't you say that the one time she actually made a REAL prediction, she wasn't even trying?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, that's right. It was kind of like that, except when Trelawney did her thing, it was like she went into a trance or something. She didn't even remember saying it afterward." He paused thoughtfully. "I suppose / could have gone into a trance. I mean, I wouldn't exactly know if I had, eh? But I'm pretty sure I didn't. I remember hearing my aunt's words, at the same time I just sort of *knew* what her real meaning was."

"I bet it's very similar to real Divination, Harry--that you have to be open or relaxed to be receptive to it, something like that. Trying to force it just confounds the whole process. Which explains why Trelawney is such a fraud 99% of the time," she noted huffily. "You've been taking it easy for a bit, maybe that opened up your mind to Legilimency."

"But I've done it before, back in... HIS office," said Harry through clenched teeth. He finally understood why people couldn't bear to say Voldemort's name; he would never utter the word "Snape" again, though not out of fear.

"Right. But Sn--...HE was teaching you how--" she raised her voice over Harry's sputters of protest--"ok, he was provoking you into doing it, fine. The *point* is that he was doing something to make it happen, and you were finding your feet. Well, maybe now you're seeing the results, that you can really do it yourself without having someone...pushing you into it."

"Hmph." Harry didn't want to consider any suggestion that Snape had ever helped him in any way.

"Fine," Hermione said exasperatedly. "Regardless of how you got there: it's very interesting that you can do it, but it bothers me that it *just happened*. You're going to need to learn to control it, Harry. Most people wouldn't appreciate knowing you have access to their inner thoughts--not to mention that you don't need people's thoughts spilling all over you at random. That's kind of creepy."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, that crossed my mind. I hate to think of Dudley suddenly dumping his little secrets on me, it'd be like being buried alive in maggots or something."

Harry and Hermione chatted a bit longer before hanging up. Despite waking up in an energetic mood, Harry dozed off and ended up napping away the rest of the morning. He awoke to a sharp rapping; he supposed, in his sleepy haze, that Tonks had sent another plate up to his door. The sound, however, was coming from the wrong end of the room. An owl was perched on the window ledge, holding a black roll of parchment in his beak. Harry frowned; the only colorful mail he'd ever seen were red Howlers, and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out what black signified. But unlike the typical owl bearing a Howler, this one didn't seem particularly anxious to get rid of the letter; on the contrary, Harry noticed that it had puffed up its chest feathers and stretched its neck, giving it an exceptionally poised and dignified air.

Harry opened the window and took the scroll from the owl, which hopped back a step, bobbed its head in a charming little bow, and took flight. Harry broke the bead of red sealing wax and unrolled it. The inside of the parchment was perfectly white, and the sunlight shone through it as if it were tissue. Harry turned it over to see if the other side was still black (it was), held it up to the window again to admire the effect, then finally took a look at what it said:

Bill Weasley

et

Fleur Delacour

invite their dear friend, Harry Potter

to seal their marriage

taking place on August the Fifth at One o'Clock

in the Wizard village square

in Dijon, France.

repondez s'il vous plait

Harry smiled. Things were starting to fall into place. His birthday was in a few weeks, after which he would be free forever from number four, Privet Drive. After moving out, he would attend his first Wizard wedding, on his first trip out of the UK. Once the wedding was over, nothing would stop him from finding Voldemort (and Snape) and putting an end to them both.

Harry rolled the parchment back up. He had never been to a wedding, Muggle or Wizard, but he knew that people generally dressed up for such occasions. For lack of anything more important to do, he rummaged through his trunk for his dress robes. They had already become absurdly short on him. *Fred and George know something about buying dress robes*, he thought; Ron had never complained about the robes they'd given him, though Harry had never seen Ron wear them either.

Harry's heart sank with another realization: people were expected to bring gifts to weddings. Aunt Petunia always made a huge deal out of wedding gifts, making sure that whatever she purchased was priced not a penny more or less than the cumulative worth of all the gifts she, Uncle Vernon, and Dudley had received from the bride and/or groom and/or their parents. She had always brought Harry along on these shopping trips, since Vernon would do nothing but complain about the expenditure and Dudley could not be relied upon to carry the bags carefully. Harry spent many an hour slouching against glass display cases while his aunt compared items, re-figured the allowed price in her head (adjusting for gifts she'd forgotten the first time through, unforgiven oversights, the number of the betrotheds' siblings also likely to get married, etc.), and eventually selected whatever kitchen appliance had been marked down the most on that particular day (later spending hours peeling every scrap of the "Final Clearance" labels off the package). In short, Harry knew exactly how NOT to buy a wedding present, but that was hardly helpful. Harry decided he would get some help with this, and put the matter out of his mind.

The next few weeks drifted by comfortably; long lazy naps, punctuated by calls from Hermione (and an occasional owl from Ron), late nights spread out prone on his bed, discovering fascinating details in his *Practical Defensive Magic* texts (a Christmas gift from Sirius and Lupin). Harry purposely avoided the Dursleys, lest he find himself the unwanted recipient of too much information; this of course was just fine with them. He sent Hedwig off with what he hoped was a gracious acceptance of the wedding invitation, then wrote to Fred and George at their shop, asking what sort of thing wizards were expected to wear to a wedding, and where he could buy them. Hedwig returned the next day bearing their promise to make him the sharpest-dressed fellow at the party (except for themselves, of course). Mrs. Figg even dropped by once on the pretense of having a neighborly tea with his aunt, slipping Harry a very nice bag of sugar quills and chocolate frogs. She had no news for him; she was a member of the Order, but being a Squib, she was by necessity stuck in the "less you know, the better" crowd.

Harry's anxiety began to build as his birthday approached. Safety notwithstanding, he still looked forward to leaving Privet Drive. In the third week of July, he received an owl from Lupin, saying that "the inheritance" was "shaping up neatly" and "friends would be arriving soon." He had so many questions for Lupin, but he sent the owl back with only a scrap of a note saying he'd be ready.

The next morning, Harry awoke to the sounds of suitcases being lugged downstairs and packed onto the car. For a moment he thought that the Dursleys had taken it upon themselves to help him move out, but that was silly--his possessions wouldn't require more than one trip down the stairs. He found his uncle in the kitchen, scratching away at a note meant for him. Uncle Vernon merely glared when he saw Harry and resumed writing. Harry was quite curious now, enough to step outside the house for the first time in weeks and ask Aunt Petunia what was going on.

"It's none of your business, but we're taking a holiday at Marge's estate."

"And you're actually leaving me here alone?"

Aunt Petunia screwed up her face in distaste. "Your uncle and I see no reason to deny ourselves the pleasure of a vacation away from home just because you're here. And you'll be leaving in a few days anyway, isn't that so?"

Harry nodded. "I'm just surprised you didn't wait until I was gone. Not afraid I'll steal everything that's not nailed down and fence it all at St. Brutus's Home for Incurable Delinquents?"

Uncle Vernon had emerged from the house and stomped over to Harry. He was already turning purple around the edges. "Don't think we haven't taken measures, boy. For all your faults, though, we agreed that you've never shown any tendency to steal--other than the room and board you've sponged from us all these years, of course. These next two weeks were the only ones Marge won't be running off to dog shows, so we're taking advantage of the opportunity."

Harry very nearly commented that, if that were really the case, these two weeks were the worst possible time to visit. Such a jab was so easy, though, that there was no satisfaction to it--and besides, it would only prolong the Dursleys' departure if Uncle Vernon were goaded into a tantrum. Harry merely raised his head high and stared past his uncle at the hydrangeas, while Vernon went into a threatening monologue about what Harry could expect if anything went missing, or if reports came back about freaks and weirdos coming to visit him during their absence.

When Uncle Vernon appeared to be finished, Harry nodded coldly and turned to Aunt Petunia. She was vigorously fanning hot air out of the car before climbing in. There was a sudden tightness in his throat as they regarded one another for what he knew would be the last time. The golden morning sunlight, which normally imparted a warm, healthy glow to whatever it touched, did nothing to soften Petunia's scrawny, pale features. Yet this was his mother's sister. She knew Harry's mother longer and better than anyone alive; the tiny fraction of her memory that he had glimpsed had told him more of *real value* about his mother than everything he'd previously discovered. Harry knew she could tell him much more; it was all there, locked tightly behind that bland facade. He could sense the white-hot light of truth burning there in her mind, knew that he could open it again...

Then Aunt Petunia turned to Dudley, who was complaining about the delay. The connection broke and Harry understood with absolute clarity that this bitter shell of a woman would burn into madness if he were to release that fire within.

Harry spent his last few days at Privet Drive in an eerie state of disbelief. He'd never had full run of the house before and it was actually rather disconcerting. As a child, he would have loved an opportunity to check out Dudley's room, with its myriad gadgets, games, and entertainments, but now the very idea that anything his cousin owned could possibly interest him was ludicrous. He did look over Uncle Vernon's stationary bicycle--never used--and found to his dismay that he could only ride a short time before becoming winded. Harry had never relied much on his physical strength or stamina; magic was a matter of the mind and heart, and even Quidditch required more technique than strength (at least for the Seeker). But he had no wish to become "soft," and spent quite a bit of his last week pedaling the bike while watching all-news networks on the television.

Aunt Petunia had left the pantry stocked with precisely enough food to fix himself three meals a day up through July 30. Not being much of a cook, he settled mainly for sandwiches, although after riding the bike for two days, he toyed with the notion of summoning Kreacher to cook something more substantial. But this would not only require him to endure Kreacher's presence, it would surely bring on lectures from Hermione. Harry managed to prepare a big batch of spaghetti all by himself.

On July 30th, Harry packed up his trunk, brought it and Hedwig's cage downstairs, and spent most of the day pedaling faster than ever on the bicycle. It helped ease the knot in his stomach. This was his last day as an underage wizard. As of midnight, he could legally perform magic any time (within the laws regarding Muggle secrecy, of course). He could Apparate if he wished. He could hop on his broom any time he felt like flying! The minutes turned to hours as he pedaled hard, going nowhere.

Mrs. Figg knocked on the screen door that evening, carrying a small white cake, with a Gryffindor lion that resembled something by Picasso drawn in icing on the top. "Happy Birthday, Harry!" she squealed as she entered.

Harry smiled wryly. "That's tomorrow, Mrs. Figg."

"Oh, I know, me luv, believe me, but something tells me I won't see you to say it tomorrow," she said with a wink. "Seventeen! Just imagine! I reckon you'll be off on your broom at the stroke of midnight, they all seem to do that."

Harry's smile widened. "Why, what a great idea you've given me, Mrs. Figg!" She responded with a mock glare and wagged a finger at him.

She bustled down the hall to the kitchen and set the cake in the middle of the kitchen table, chattering all the way about nothing in particular. Once settled at the table with tea, she regarded Harry fondly. "Just look at you. To think you were once knee-high to a cricket. Oh, Harry. Now you're a fine young man." Her eyes sparkled warmly as Harry held her gaze and fumbled for something to say.

Without warning, it happened again. One minute, he was simply sitting with Mrs Figg; the next, he was buried under an avalanche of Mrs. Figg. Fortunately she was busy reminiscing about Baby Harry, so the thoughts flooding him were not nearly as personal as those from Aunt Petunia. He watched himself suffering abuses at Dudley's hands through her eyes, some of which he had completely forgotten, others that he could still recall from his own perspective. The latter kept combining themselves in a rather uncomfortable way, giving him a sensation of vertigo. He felt her outrage at the way the Dursleys treated him. He wrote letters with her hand to Albus Dumbledore, begging him to find a better home for that poor child; he read the responses, always asking her to trust him, even though it was painful.

When the tide ebbed and Harry's eyes would focus again, he saw that Mrs. Figg was staring at him with a horrified expression.

"What did you just... do to me?" she said weakly.

"Mrs. Figg, I'm *so* sorry! It's just started *happening* lately, I don't even know what it is! No, that's not true, it's Legilimency, but I don't know why it's happening, I'm not trying to do it, I swear!" Harry's voice was panicky, pleading; he was stunned that she had been aware of what happened. He felt deeply ashamed for violating her privacy, even though he hadn't done it on purpose.

She choked back a sob but gestured to Harry to stay in his seat. After a moment, she composed herself and said, shakily, "I've heard of Legilimency, Harry, but I've never seen it before...Merlin's ghost, child, that's just been 'happening' and no one's had anything to say about it?"

Harry slumped in his chair. "It just happened once, with Aunt Petunia," he groaned. "She didn't seem to know anything was going on."

"Your aunt... I see," said Mrs. Figg. "Well, maybe Muggles can't feel it, or something like that."

"That's what I figured. But I guess it's different for Squibs."

"Must be, dear," she said, her voice nearly back to normal. "I know wizards are aware of it; maybe I've got a little bit of magic in me yet."

Harry recalled the helplessness and rage he felt in Snape's office, as that hated man had explored freely in his mind while Harry had no idea how to stop him. "It's been done to me. I know how it feels and I didn't like it. Please, please believe me, that I didn't do it on purpose."

She managed a wan smile. "I do believe you, Harry. I've seen you wallop that brat Dudley every now and then over the years, and I *know* you didn't mean to use magic--you didn't even know you had it in you!"

Harry remembered setting that snake free at the zoo, before he'd ever heard of Hogwarts; he hadn't known how he'd done it. He regarded Mrs. Figg carefully. She looked a bit shaken, but not angry; she really had forgiven him.

"I walloped Dudley? Really??" he asked as playfully as he could manage. Mrs. Figg laughed and reached across the table to pat his hand. "Oh, you certainly did, child, why there was one time..."

The two of them chatted at the table until well into evening. As the dinner hour neared, Mrs. Figg offered to make supper, and Harry gladly accepted. She produced an unexpectedly tasty chicken in sauce from the few remaining ingredients in his aunt's fridge (though she had to raid the freezer too). As they cleared the table, she asked Harry whether the clocks had the correct time.

"They should. Why?"

"Well, goodness. I wasn't supposed to tell you, but now I'm getting worried. There were... plans tonight, Harry... a little birthday gathering. They said they'd bring dinner. I was only supposed to make the cake. I rather thought they'd be here by now... long before now, to be honest."

Harry felt his throat tighten. Lupin had said that people would be coming for him, too. "I'm going to check something," he said, and began rummaging through his trunk for his cell phone.

Hermione answered his call right away. "All's quiet as far as I know," she said. "I heard there ~~was~~ supposed to be a small group coming to escort you. Hang on, I'll check on things right now."

Harry heard a clunk as she set the phone down. Hermione spoke in the distance, barely audible, followed by a woman's voice, then quick footfalls on a wooden floor. Some crunching sounds, a moment of quiet, then Hermione abruptly picked up the phone and spoke.

"Okay, Harry, I had my parents' fireplace hooked into the Floo Network. Technically speaking, I'm not supposed to use it for outgoing calls, but I think this constitutes an emergency!" she said. Harry heard a whooshing noise; she must have added the Floo Powder to the flames. "Number 12, Grimmauld Place," she whispered. Harry could hear the crackle of kindling; she must have brought the phone right into the fireplace with her. They waited a moment, and presently Harry heard Tonks answering.

"Hermes! What're you doing in the fire? This isn't the best time."

"Harry just told me no one's arrived there yet."

Tonks' voice was dubious. "He did? Well, yes, that's right, we're having a bit of trouble. Three people tried to Apparate into his backyard and they all Splinched. We flagged down the Knight Bus, but it wouldn't go within a mile of his house, it just stopped running. Moody was on it. He said there's wild magic in the air (no one's sure exactly what the heck he meant by that), but he didn't think there was a problem. Said it was something to do with the protective spell coming to an end; it was a pretty big piece of work and it's collapsing all on its own, so it's wreaking some havoc. He reckons we can Apparate once it's gone at midnight. A couple of people are just now suiting up in Muggle clothes--we'll get as close as we can by magic, and just walk the rest of the way. Including me, which is why I have to go. So don't worry, Herm, we're on the job, OK?"

"Ok, thanks, see ya soon," said Hermione, and the sounds of the fire stopped abruptly. "Did you hear that, Harry?"

"Yeah," he said. "Weird. I'll be glad when this is over."

"We all will, but it--" A burst of static cut off Hermione's voice. Harry strained to make out a few fragments of words, then the phone quit entirely. He felt a brief surge of panic, but reassured himself that "wild magic" would probably interfere with cell phones as well as the Knight Bus. Just to test this theory, he turned on the TV and was relieved to see that it had no reception whatsoever.

Within a half hour, Tonks arrived with Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Harry was a little relieved that they'd been delayed till after dark. Tonks, bouncing up the walk with her magenta hair, and an enormous black man wearing a pirate earring, pretty much spanned the Dursleys' definition of "freaks and weirdos." They had just settled into the living room, when all the lights in the house went out.

Harry heard two sets of feet hit the floor and immediately felt both Aurors at his sides. Shacklebolt's hand was on his shoulder, pushing him down low in his chair. All three jumped at a clicking sound from across the room. A flame illuminated Mrs. Figg's face; she was calmly holding a Zippo lighter and peering out the window.

"Oh, dear, the whole block is out..." she said, turning back from the window, but she fell silent with a shocked expression at the sight of three very serious faces and three wands aimed at her. "Good heavens, don't point those at me!"

"Douse that flame!" ordered Tonks, and Mrs. Figg obliged right away. They all scanned the room, the house, the yard, straining to hear any sound of intruders. Nothing. Candles began to appear in the windows of other houses, and after a few minutes, Harry began to feel a bit silly.

"Um, I think it's just a power failure."

"Shhh!" hissed one of the Aurors; Harry could not tell which. A few more minutes dragged by in silence. The lights flickered on once, but dimmed and went out again.

It dawned on Harry that the words "power failure" had no meaning in the Wizarding world, so he tried again. "Look, Muggles use this stuff called electricity to make light. Sometimes it stops working. Other Muggle things stopped working earlier. I really think this is just more wild magic."

Now that their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he could see the Aurors glance at one another, and at him. Shacklebolt relaxed somewhat and released Harry's shoulder, but Tonks suddenly stepped away from him and pointed her wand in his face.

"Who said anything about wild magic, Harry?"

Harry gaped in shock, but put the pieces together quickly. "Calm down! It's me! Hermione and I were on the phone when she talked to you. Just before you came here."

"The foam..." Tonks said.

"Phone," piped up Mrs. Figg. "It's sort of like Floo powder for Muggles."

Tonks stood her ground for a few more seconds, then dropped her wand. "Harry... you have *got* to knock it off with the surprises. Everyone's on edge; it's wands first, ask questions later." She paused a moment. "Sorry I almost broke you in two."

Harry gulped. "No problem." He wasn't sure if she was joking or not, but he had no doubt she could do it.

The four of them sat on the floor of the darkened house (Shacklebolt wanted them out of line of sight from the window) and munched on the cake Mrs. Figg had made. Harry wanted to talk, to ask questions, but as the Aurors were distracted by every little sound, he soon gave up. Besides, it was almost midnight, and he was getting a bit anxious himself at what might happen.

"I'm going to take your belongings outside, Harry," said Shacklebolt. "I'm getting a feeling... we may need to get out in a hurry." Harry started to stand, but Shacklebolt waved him down. "You stay put, I'll get them." As he hauled the trunk and Hedwig's cage through the door, Tonks made a face at his back and smirked at Harry. "Fancies



he's a Seer now, eh?"

Harry grinned, but he was getting downright nervous himself. He was noticing an awful lot of little sounds himself, surely more than the usual number. He glanced at his watch, discovering for the millionth time that he no longer wore it because it had broken years ago. It occurred to him that with the power out, he had no way to know when midnight arrived.

"Tonks, this is silly. What difference is five minutes going to make? Let's just go."

"Five minutes is the difference between *underage* sorcery and adult. You still have enemies in the Ministry, Harry. Petty-minded people like Umbridge who can hold grudges like you wouldn't believe. They'd never confront you now, especially if it happened when we were under attack, but they'd file it away for later. Why hand them free ammunition? Though I do wish we'd just smuggled you out hours ago, the waiting is enough to--"

They both jolted as a very low, creaking groan filled the air, seemingly coming from every part of the house at once. Nothing moved, nothing looked different, but there was no mistaking the sound of stress deep within the wood and nails. Tonks and Harry glanced at each other and each knew exactly what the other was thinking. They bolted to the front door, yanking Mrs. Figg along in mid-stride.

Shacklebolt was already leaping onto the porch; he had to veer awkwardly against the wall to keep from plowing into them. It was bright outside, as if the streetlamps were still working, but Harry immediately saw that the light was confined only to his yard. In fact, it was getting brighter as he sprinted down the sidewalk. He realized that the edge of the light was coming toward him like a glowing wall. He didn't know if it was dangerous or not, but it was too late to worry about it; the four of them flew into it at top speed. Harry felt his hair blow back as though he'd walked in front of a fan, but nothing worse.

As soon as he hit the pavement, Harry whirled around to see what was happening. The wall of light was actually a dome, arching over the house. Swirls and streaks of red and orange roiled and churned in a single layer, resembling some sort of laser show. It was shrinking; Harry could see the edge creeping across the lawn, the blades of grass rippling inward as it passed. Harry heard Shacklebolt mutter an incantation behind him, followed by a small pop; clear of the "wild magic," he'd been able to cast a spell to transport Harry's trunk.

The dome slipped smoothly through the walls of the house, blazing out through the windows. The light grew brighter as the surface became more concentrated. The lower edge of the dome began to curve inward; by the time it had crossed the living room, it had become an extremely bright sphere. The sphere collapsed faster and faster into its center, which lay inside Harry's little cupboard under the stairs. It slipped out of view behind the cupboard door, though a few rays of light beamed from around the door frame and the joints of the steps.

Then it was gone. For an instant, there was not a sound to be heard, not even a cricket.

It started in the cupboard. Light began to shine from within again, not the warm red of the sphere, but a poisonous green. The entire staircase burst into flames. A second green light streamed from Harry's bedroom window, followed quickly by flames. Harry would have kept watching from the curb, but suddenly found himself being hurtled across the street. Shacklebolt had scooped Harry and Mrs. Figg into his massive arms and was charging away from Number Four at top speed, Tonks right on his heels. They dove behind a neighbor's car. As soon as Shacklebolt loosened his grip, Harry popped his head up to watch through the windows.

The house was now ablaze with green lights. The window of his bedroom exploded inward, followed quickly by the rest of the exterior wall. The debris mainly flew onto his bed; jagged boards and shards of glass jabbed into the mattress. Glowing snakes slithered through the lawn, setting the grass afire in their wake, and disappeared into the foundations. What looked like a flock of luminous swifts dived down the chimney and blasted it apart, the bricks flying into the house at terrible speeds and smashing through walls, floors, and ceilings. The stairs collapsed and Harry could see that more green and yellow-green lights were bursting open where his cupboard used to be. Some were accelerating the flames that were already roaring, while others seemed to sputter out, as though the spell were so old or feebly cast that it had become a dud.

Harry felt Hedwig land on his shoulder very delicately, but the spectacle was too fascinating to tear his eyes away. The neighbors began to pour into the street to watch the show. Apparently none had the presence of mind to call the fire department, not that it would have mattered. Harry's stomach clenched as he realized that if it weren't for Aunt Marge's estate, there would be nothing left of the Dursleys either. *Hoo, boy*, he thought. *They're going to hit the roof...if they still had one.*

He watched, mesmerized, until nothing remained of Number Four but a pile of rubble, and the last of the green lights flickered and died, finding nothing left to ignite. But when Harry finally turned away, he met an even more startling scene: his three companions were staring at *him*, with incredulous expressions that seemed more apropos of the destruction across the street than himself. His brows flew up, then furrowed. "What?" he said, throwing his hands wide.

None of them spoke, but Shacklebolt slowly pointed at the bird on Harry's shoulder. Hedwig must be nibbling on something particularly vile to provoke this sort of reaction! Harry stretched his neck away from his shoulder even as he turned to look.

The bird resting on his shoulder was not Hedwig. It was not, technically speaking, even a bird.

Harry was looking into the flaming eyes of a phoenix.

## 3: Flights of Fancy

*Chapter 3 of 50*

Harry has an incendiary experience over London, followed by a very odd meeting. An update on the State of the Order from Lupin.



In the space of a heartbeat, Harry adopted the same stunned expression as the others.

"F-Fawkes? How are you, fella?" Harry hoped it was Fawkes, at any rate. He couldn't come up with a better explanation for the sudden appearance of a huge, red bird on his shoulder. He raised a tentative hand to ruffle Fawkes' feathers, and instantly wished he hadn't. This was no mere pet, but a fully realized magical entity--he might as well have greeted Tonks or Shacklebolt by skritch-ing them behind the ears. But Fawkes didn't seem to mind; he even stretched his long neck to bonk his head against Harry's forehead, briskly rubbing it with the side of his bill. Tonks found her voice at last. "Wow. It's, ah, nice to have you back, Fawkes. We've all wondered where you've been." Fawkes straightened himself upright again and tipped his head at the two Aurors with a quiet chirp. Then he turned his attention back to Harry, peering at him with glowing eyes and trilling a beautiful glissando that ended on a high note, like a human being might end a question.

Harry knew Fawkes was trying to communicate, and he wished his newfound Legilimency would kick in again, but all he could do was stare and wonder. Sirens were beginning to wail in the distance, growing closer, and Harry knew that once the police arrived, there would be a lot of uncomfortable questions that he would be expected to answer. Already the neighbors were interrupting their gawking to express their opinions on what had happened, and Harry could hear his name being muttered all around him.

"Yeah," Harry said awkwardly, "it's great to see you... but we really need to get going. Um, I'm going to need to Apparate now... if you don't mind." Fawkes, however, showed no intention of surrendering his current perch, and although Harry didn't think it would be very polite to just disappear out from under the phoenix, he didn't know if it was even possible to simply bring Fawkes along for the ride--like a house elf, he had his own form of Apparating that might not work at all with human sorcery. Harry raised his wand and pointed to it hopefully, but Fawkes continued gazing at him, serene and unperturbable. Harry turned to the others with a pleading look.

"Um..." said Tonks, "I, uh, hmm... Do you have any ideas?" She glanced at Shacklebolt, who folded his arms with a look of deep concentration.

"I don't know," he said finally, "but I think we can assume Fawkes knows exactly what's going on. Perhaps he doesn't want Harry to Apparate?" Fawkes bobbed his head, gripped Harry's shoulder tightly for a brief instant, then leaned forward to spread his beautiful wings and launch into a graceful glide. He landed a few feet away, hopped around to face them again, and quickly flapped his wings three times, just enough to gain a bit of height as he lifted something off the ground.

"My Firebolt!" said Harry. "You want me to fly?" Fawkes trilled softly. Harry looked quizzically at the Aurors. "Should I?"

Shacklebolt frowned. "We don't have brooms here, we couldn't follow you." Fawkes chirped and bobbed his head enthusiastically. "You don't want us to follow him?" Another chirp. "I would say Fawkes has something in mind, Harry. Well, we are the Order of the *Phoenix*, after all. I say go with him." Tonks nodded in agreement.

"Right, then," said Harry, with unconcealed glee, "we'll meet you at Headquarters." He took two steps toward his broom, then Fawkes beat his wings mightily and flipped it straight into Harry's hands. Harry leapt up to mount the broom as he caught it, taking flight in the same movement as though never to set foot on the soil of Privet Drive again.

The sirens, the gossip, and the crackling of the last few timbers of Number Four fell away as Harry climbed steeply into the sky at top speed, the cool night air whistling in his ears and blowing his hair out of his eyes for a perfect view of the sliver of moon over the dark landscape. The power was still out below him, though as Harry gained altitude, he could see the far-off edge of the blackout, a wide circle centered on his former home. It was far too dark for any Muggle to see him launch, and soon he would be much too high to spot, even where the lights were working. After weeks of captivity, he was free, lawless, untouchable.

But not alone. He heard the barest whispering rustle at his side, and, without looking, knew that Fawkes was with him, powerful red wings scooping the air, forcing it to aid him in defiance of gravity. They climbed higher and higher, until the heavy summer air became cool and thin, and all of London sprawled below them. Harry eased his weight toward his shoulders, tipping the nose of the broom downward so he leveled out in a graceful arc. Fawkes settled into a glide alongside Harry, his wings open to their full span. They regarded one another silently, each exhilarated with the joy of flight, each delighted to have a like-minded companion.

Fawkes suddenly tipped himself to the left, the yaw bringing him into a gradual turn, and Harry followed. Fawkes continued to tip, his wings losing lift as they became more vertical, and he dropped away sharply into a tight spiraling descent. Harry followed, "threading the needle" by plummeting through the center of the spiral, though not quite in a free fall; by slowing ever so slightly, he kept level with Fawkes, creating the illusion that the phoenix was simply circling him, wings motionless.

Fawkes leveled off to take advantage of a thermal updraft, and Harry quickly pulled out of the dive to watch him climb again, his wings open and still, letting the air push him effortlessly upward. Harry could feel the thermal, but his broom was powered by magic, not physics, and did not respond to aerodynamic forces the way Fawkes did. Harry wrapped his knees and ankles tightly around his broom and allowed himself to roll beneath it as he climbed, settling into an arc just above Fawkes; dangling under the broom, Harry's back gently brushed Fawkes's. Harry could feel the muscles responding to variations in the air current, different pinion feathers stretching and shrinking back to achieve the most lift. Harry let his head rest on the base of Fawkes' neck and closed his eyes, allowing the phoenix to guide their flight. He felt their climb grow sluggish, as the thermal spent itself, and when Fawkes finally beat his wings, Harry's eyes flew open in awe at their strength and control. He righted himself in order to keep up, but he wished he could spend the rest of the night flying back-to-back with Fawkes, studying his mastery of the air.

The two of them careened through the night for hours, absorbed in their mutual love of flight. But finally Harry chanced to look down and realized that not only had persons and cars shrunk to specks and disappeared, but trees and even whole buildings were indiscernable. To his surprise, he also noticed that he was breathing very hard. Harry halted with the realization that he was dangerously high, the air too thin to supply the oxygen he required. Yet he paused there a moment to take in the view of the land below, the bright interior of the city, the thin black river snaking through it. Fawkes had kept climbing, but presently he fluttered back down and landed on Harry's broomstick as though admiring the view as well.

"I think... I need... to descend... a bit," panted Harry, feeling a bit sheepish that he had to spoil the fun over something as mundane as breathing. He peered at Fawkes over his glasses, wondering if Fawkes was disappointed and, if so, would it show in any way that Harry could understand, when it happened for the second time that day. Fawkes met Harry's gaze, and that indescribable *connection* formed.

Harry could barely grasp what was pouring into his mind. Fawkes was a being without language, and so ancient that his memories didn't just tumble out, they steamrolled. It was like drinking from a fire hose, centuries of knowledge pouring into his mind so fast and so alien that Harry couldn't even begin to decipher it. He soon stopped trying, and just let them flow through him. It was similar to listening to a symphony--he could feel the passion being conveyed, even though he couldn't recognize a single specific

"note."

When the link began to disintegrate, Harry realized he was falling. His broomstick was gone, and he and Fawkes were plummeting through the air together; the phoenix had wrapped his wings around Harry's head and drawn him in tight to his feathery chest. Many thoughts flashed through Harry's mind at once; that the ground was much closer than it had been the last time he'd seen it, and was coming closer at a remarkable speed; that he really *ought* to be frightened (or at least disconcerted) by the fact that he could not hope to survive this fall; that he had absolute confidence that none of it mattered, that he was safer now than he had ever been, even when he was encased in the unseen magic that had broken the *Avada* curse.

Fawkes twisted his neck down between his folded wings to warble at Harry one more time, then burst into flames.

It would not be fully correct to say that Harry *awoke* in the courtyard of #12 Grimmauld Place, because he had not been asleep or unconscious. But as he blinked and took in the familiar structure, the dewy grass, he felt as though his whole life had been a bit like a daydream up till now, and he had just now snapped up, fully alert. The flames had scorched his clothes to dust as he fell, yet had not singed so much as a single hair. He had landed at a speed that should have crushed him to jelly, yet he was not only alive, he felt no pain. Harry was utterly unconcerned about Fawkes; he *knew* that the phoenix was nearby, unharmed, and that he would soon understand all of what just happened. For a moment, Harry did nothing but breathe, deeply at peace with himself and the world, a veritable Buddha among wizards.

Then an unknown voice spoke very softly from a corner of the courtyard. "Hello, falling star. Do you still own your heart?" Strange words, in a strange accent that he couldn't place. Harry sat up, discovering the dark outline of a witch in the wan light of the crescent moon. The Zen moment abruptly dissipated as Harry registered the fact that he was stretched out stark naked in the middle of Order Headquarters, and a stranger, a woman, was eyeing him from the shadows with intense curiosity.

The woman laughed. "I guess so. Hee hee! Perhaps you'd like a fig leaf?"

Harry was fervently glad to see his Firebolt wafting down to him like a feather, and he pulled it into his lap as soon as it was within reach, glaring angrily at the witch, still too nonplussed to speak. He briefly wondered if it was Luna Lovegood; this was exactly the kind of off-the-wall greeting he'd expect from her, but the voice and accent were completely wrong. Luna always sounded like she might float off in a strong wind, but this one was quite edgy, a no-nonsense, no-quarter kind of voice.

The witch muttered an unintelligible spell, and a brief light flickered from her wand. Harry was very surprised to see that she was *not* looking at him at all; her back was turned, it had been the whole time. He heard the rustle of fabric falling into a heap as the wandlight went out; she had conjured a robe or blanket, he couldn't tell which. "We'll meet again, in the light," she said very quietly, and slipped into the house before he could answer.

Harry stared after her until the door clicked shut, then slunk self-consciously over to what turned out to be a blanket. He wrapped himself in it, biting his lip gently with regret that had assumed the worst of this stranger, who had been in the process of doing him a rather kind favor. Still, she spoke so strangely, how could he have guessed what she was up to? He muttered under his breath, "Okay, that was one spooky witch."

Harry reckoned that people were probably waiting up for him in the kitchen, but he wished he could find his trunk and put some clothes on before making his entrance. He had no idea where Shackbolt had sent his luggage, and he decided that the only thing worse than walking into a kitchen full of people while wearing nothing but a blanket, would be waking up some unsuspecting soul by barging into their bedroom in the middle of the night while wearing nothing but a blanket.

Tonks, Shackbolt, Lupin, and several other witches and wizards had been sitting around the long table in the basement kitchen, looking anything but relaxed as they sipped from various bottles and cups. At least one of them was glancing at the clock at any given moment. Harry didn't even have time to set foot on the stairs before the nearest people saw him, and relieved cries of "Harry!" "He's here!" "You made it!" rippled around the table. Tonks bolted up the stairs and yanked him into a hug so tight that she crushed the air right out of his chest. "Cor, Harry, I've been worried sick, it'd be my neck on the block if you didn't turn up." She let him go and gave him a peck on the cheek, but he was too busy catching his breath even to notice.

"It's okay, everything's fine, no worries," Harry mumbled to the panoply of relieved faces filling the stairwell. Tonks, the closest, no longer looked anxious, however, but surprised.

"Harry... are you not wearing any clothes?" she asked, in a tone that suggested he was in major trouble if he had stopped to take a leisurely bath before letting them know he'd arrived.

He shrugged, feeling ridiculous for about the millionth time that night. "It's a long story, but no." Her eyes bugged out at him for an instant, then her smile returned and she pulled him down the stairs.

Harry awoke the next morning feeling a bit foggy; he'd stayed up almost until dawn recounting the night's events to everyone in the kitchen. He was in the same bedroom he'd shared with Ron on other occasions, but he was alone this time, except for Hedwig, who was glaring at him. "What?" he snapped, pulling some clothes out of his trunk. He was glad he didn't have any letters to send; she looked as though she would bite his finger off at the next opportunity. "Come on, now!" he said. "You've got water, food... *don't* tell me you're jealous because I flew here and you didn't?" She squawked loudly and turned her back; Harry rolled his eyes and got dressed.

He found Lupin and an unknown wizard in the kitchen. "Good morning, Harry--again!" smiled Lupin over his toast. "Join us! This is Lachlan Arukangi, he's from New Zealand!"

"Call me Lachlan," said the wizard, offering his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Potter!"

"It's Harry." He was starving, so he gave Lachlan a drive-by handshake on his way to the stove, where he ladled himself some porridge.

Lupin patted the next chair, and Harry gladly sat beside him. "Everyone's so excited by what happened last night. Hagrid only had time to say how wonderful it is that Fawkes chose you before he was off this morning."

"Off?" blurted Harry around a big spoonful.

"To America. He wanted to see you before he left, but they were really in a hurry; he's trying to make it back before the wedding."

Harry was torn between asking who Lachlan was, what "Fawkes chose you" meant, why Hagrid was going to America, and who "they" were. At the moment, though, his stomach won the battle; he was ravenous after flying around all night.

Three bowls later, Harry felt as though he had a lead weight in his belly. He waited for the other two wizards to come to a break in their conversation, gazing at Lupin expectantly. His former professor sighed with a weary smile. "I suppose you're ready for a debriefing, Harry?"

Harry gave a single nod and said, "The drawing room?" Lupin nodded in return, patted Lachlan on the shoulder, refilled his coffee mug, and headed up the stairs without a word.

The drawing room was bright and airy, except for the corner in which the Black family tapestry hung; that part of the room still maintained a dreary, tomblike darkness. They both settled into the ancient armchairs, which had recently been restuffed and reupholstered in Gryffindor red. Harry had so many questions, he didn't know where to begin.

"I hope you don't mind that we've taken some liberties with your new home, Harry," said Lupin, indicating the chairs and the room as a whole.

Harry took a deep breath as he processed that comment; he still hadn't wrapped his head around the concept that this house belonged *to him*. "No, no, I'm glad you have. Thank you."

They regarded one another for a moment, until Lupin finally broke into a crooked grin. "It's hard to know where to start, isn't it?"

Harry blinked, grinning as well. "Start with what you've been doing besides housework."

"That narrows it down," Lupin smirked. "All right. You left after the funeral. We sent people out to look for Snape and Malfoy. Nothing. We expected no less. Snape's house in Manchester had been emptied; the Malfoy manor was abandoned, apparently in a hurry. Narcissa left a lot of expensive things behind. We assume they're hiding out at some other Death Eater's home, though they could be with You-Know-Who himself."

"And do we know where he is?"

Lupin averted his eyes. "No. We've scoured his old haunting grounds, so to speak. We can't find him in Albania, France, Morocco, or Brazil. The Muggle governments are helping with the search; they've got a camera in a 'saddle of light' or something like that, it gallops high above the world and can take a picture of anything, anywhere--but only if it knows where to look. We'll be able to read the parchment on his nightstand--*after* we find him," he grumbled ruefully. "Unfortunately, it's finding him that's the trick."

Harry nodded. "We'll find him."

Lupin smiled humorlessly, then continued. "We have a lot of things to find. I've learned about the Horcruxes, Harry. Dumbledore described them in his will. He intended the two of you to find the rest together, but he also anticipated that he might not make it."

Harry couldn't answer, except to nod. The thought that he and Dumbledore might have worked together, as they had that last fateful night, made him go numb throughout.

"As you know, Dumbledore suspected there would be six. He destroyed the Gaunt heirloom ring. You had already found the diary. Slytherin's pendant is still a mystery, it may or may not be destroyed. A team of Aurors is pinpointing Helga Hufflepuff's gold cup, and we have people poring meticulously through 700 years' worth of wills, receipts, and such, trying to locate relics from Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. The only one of Gryffindor's that we know of right now is the sword in the Headmaster's office, and it's no Horcrux."

Lupin sighed. "This is the great mystery of our time. Everyone's uncomfortable with the idea that he's used two items from Slytherin, but only one from the rest of the Houses. Of course he'd have more than one from within his family, but then why the diary? Why not a third Slytherin relic? It would be more balanced to have three of Slytherin's and three others; that's just the kind of detail he would attend to. We must be missing something.

"And of course, not everyone believes he's sticking with House relics at all. Some people, including Dumbledore (as you know) suspect there's one in that snake of his, but most agree it would be...uncharacteristic of him to use an animal, even a fairly long-lived one like a snake. Particularly since he sends her out on missions into our territory--he'd be foolish to risk a fragment of his soul by sending it into the Ministry of Magic to attack Arthur Weasley, for example. Others think he's used some piece of junk, you know, something so worthless that no one would ever think to pick it up--like a Portkey. Hiding in plain sight. The diary certainly fit that kind of mold. But I think he's far too arrogant to house his soul in a bit of rubbish."

"Exactly," said Harry. "It must also be something that his followers can find right away if he needs it. He can't take the chance that his last bit of soul ends up at the bottom of a Muggle landfill."

"That's my suspicion--that he has followers out there hiding the Horcruxes for him. The Order and the Ministry are interrogating people around the world, but it's just as bad as that Muggle camera--millions of people to talk to, but only a handful know the answer. We're hoping to tip the odds in our favor: Horace Slughorn has been preparing Felix Felicis, but the stuff's a nightmare to brew and then it has to age for seven weeks. The first batch is just about ready for the aging process."

Harry nodded; Slughorn had given him a vial of that potion less than a year earlier. "It'll help them ask all the right questions, for sure, but the luck will be finding the right person to interrogate. You should start with a map, maybe have ten people throw darts at it for a while, see where most of them land, look there first."

Lupin gaped at him. "Harry... I don't know what darts are, but I think you're onto something. Maybe we should stop *searching* for Voldemort's fortress, and use the Felix luck to *discover* it!" He patted down his robe for a quill and a scrap of parchment and scribbled himself a note furiously, then looked up in embarrassment. "Sorry, Harry, I have a lot on my mind lately."

"It all fell to you when Dumbledore died."

Lupin's head dropped forward. "And I'm no Albus Dumbledore," he said mournfully.

Harry gazed at him sadly. "Neither am I. But we'll manage somehow." He wished he could think of something more comforting; Lupin looked as though the weight of the world was upon him, and in some ways, it was.

Lupin cleared his throat. "Quite right, Harry, no looking back. Where were we?"

"Finding the Horcruxes."

"Yes, yes. There are two main schools of thought over the whole issue. Dumbledore believed we should eliminate as many of them as we can, prior to launching any full-scale attack on Voldemort. No such attack has ever worked, after all--his prior defeat was not achieved by conventional sorcery, as you well know. It seems reasonable to assume that he has protected his new...incarnation as well or better than before. The Ministry has studied your description of the way he was regenerated, and, as usual, he picked an excellent spell; they say we should consider his power fully restored. Some idiot in the Department of Mysteries actually suggested we use the same spell to revive Dumbledore; fortunately, the entire Auror division squashed that idea--the last thing we need is some Dark caricature of Dumbledore on the loose.

"It makes sense on several fronts to weaken him in every way possible before attacking, but the trouble is, no one's certain that destroying the Horcruxes will actually affect him. If his soul has been truly cleaved, then destroying a fragment may not be any more effective than, say, grinding up a single shard of a broken dish. The remaining pieces would be neither more nor less strong. That brings us to the opposite argument--that we should focus our efforts on Voldemort's physical being, and once that's gone, we make a concerted effort to wipe out the Horcruxes. We're sure to suffer some losses, no matter which front we take on first--that is, no matter what we do to weaken the enemy, we will also become weaker. It's impossible to say whether our gains would outweigh our losses. So from that perspective, we ought to strike as hard and fast as we can at the most difficult target, take care of the easier stuff afterward."

"And which side are you on?" asked Harry.

Lupin ran a hand through his unkempt hair. "They both have good points. I think... that is, I'm *inclined* to focus on the Horcruxes. They kept him linked to this world the last time he was defeated, and they'll do it again. And he surely has no intention of wandering the wilderness for years without a body a second time. That was probably his first step after he incarnated, to make sure he'd have a new body right away if this one was killed. He hasn't come this far by repeating his mistakes."

Harry gazed toward the Black family tapestry for a moment, idly twirling a loose string on his robe. "Yeah, he's arrogant, but not to the point of carelessness. He analyzes it when things go wrong and makes changes. We need to do the exact same thing. The Horcruxes allowed him to restore himself last time. We can't repeat that mistake."

Lupin let his head fall back into the chair, breathing deeply. He even stretched his hands along the armrests, looking for a moment like an ordinary man discussing social matters over cognac at an exclusive club. When he regarded Harry again, his look of relief was almost painful to see.

"So let me guess," Harry said drily, "because *you're* all for the Horcrux approach, the Ministry is dead set on the direct attack on Voldemort." It wasn't even a question; Harry knew how the game was played by now.

"Well, it's not quite that blatant," said Lupin diplomatically, "but yes, that seems to be the prevailing mood at the Ministry." They both rolled their eyes and smiled grimly.

"Then *our* path is perfectly clear. Good!" Harry shifted in his chair slightly. "Tell me about our allies. Have we heard more from the giants?"

"Hagrid has been working on that. Now that Grawp has really started to communicate, he's confirming what Dumbledore had guessed--that many giants are unhappy about their living conditions, the strict caste system, and so on, and have been looking for an opportunity to break their families out of the cycle. Voldemort's promised them the world, of course, but only the most grandiose are foolish enough to believe him. The rest can smell a rat; they expect to be wiped out like the other 'impure races'; once Voldemort is through with them. Of course, their clan will wipe them out *right now* if they don't obey the Gurg, so they're in rather a tight spot.

"Persuading them to fight Voldemort is the least of our worries. The immediate issue is that they first need help to escape their clans, which means they also need a new place to live. And before that, we have to gain their trust. You know the general prejudice against giants in the Wizard community; we'd have to start with our own people, convince them that they should be nice to giants." Lupin shook his head, eyes downcast. "If we had a hundred years, maybe..."

Harry sighed. "Well, at least we know what they need, and want. We just have to figure out how to give it to them."

"I understand that's why Hagrid's off to America. To be honest, I've left the whole matter up to he and Ondossi; I don't know all the details."

"Ondossi?"

Lupin grinned. "That's the good news, Harry, I'm getting to that! Every wizard community in the world was shaken up by the news of Dumbledore's murder. Even the ones who are too young or far away to really remember Voldemort's first reign, they had their illusions of safety shattered that day. Wizard soldiers have been coming from every corner of the world to join the Order; it's truly Dumbledore's Army now! Lachlan, you met at breakfast, is the headmaster of the New Zealand Academy of Magic. He has a network of Maori wizards searching the entire South Pacific for Voldemort. Hayao Yamada from Japan, he's a master of Defense Against the Dark Arts, probably the finest in the world after Dumbledore. There's a bloke from Namibia, he's a Bushman from the Kalahari Desert; wait till you hear him talk, I still can't say his name, they have whole new sounds in their language!"

Lupin became so animated while describing these new allies that Harry felt guilty for interrupting, but he wanted to know just whom had been entrusted with Hagrid's company. Hagrid wasn't supposed to use magic (though he obviously had a wand hidden inside that absurd pink brollie), and Harry did *not* like the idea of his friend gallivanting across the ocean with some stranger. "That's all great, but who's Ondossi?"

"Of course, sorry, Harry. Tura Ondossi is... well, she's from Northport, which is the largest Wizard city in America. She actually came here at Dumbledore's request--he had left instructions regarding the management of Hogwarts in his will. He appointed her to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry frowned. "Why not the Japanese guy?"

"I don't know Dumbledore's reasons, but I would much prefer to have him fighting than teaching at this point. He's not just good at spells, he's a tactician and a natural leader. Tura, on the other hand, is..." Lupin paused, looking up, as though hoping the right adjective would float into view. He opened his mouth twice, but rejected whatever he had in mind; he finally settled on "... spooky."

"Yeah? I think I met her. Last night, in the courtyard when I landed, there was a witch out there, she... talked funny."

Lupin smirked. "Like you didn't have to actually say anything to be part of the conversation?" Harry nodded. "That was her. A bit hard to describe, isn't it?"

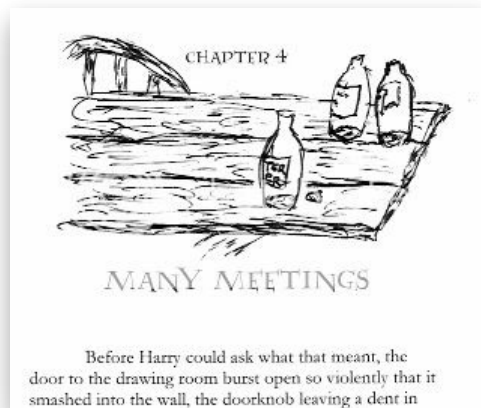
"'Spooky' works," said Harry. "Is she an actual Seer, then?"

"No, no, spookier than that," winked Lupin. "She's a Legilimagus. And, if recent rumors are correct, so are you, Harry."

## 4: Many Meetings

*Chapter 4 of 50*

Harry catches up with more friends at Grimmauld Place and Diagon Alley, but soon grows restless.



Before Harry could ask what that meant, the door to the drawing room burst open so violently that it smashed into the wall, the doorknob leaving a dent in the plaster. It very nearly rebounded shut again on Tonks, who stood framed in the doorway with an enormous grin; today her hair was candy-apple red, and she wore lipstick to match.

"Happy Birthday, Harry!" she shouted, crossing nearly the whole length of the room in one leap to plant a sticky kiss on his cheek, which Harry was certain had left a red imprint that would last all day. Lupin's eyes lit up as she launched to his side and left her mark on him as well. "Come on, you two, you can spare a bit of time for fun! Let's celebrate!" Lupin tried to pull her into his lap, though it might have been easier to harness a moth; she had no intention of settling quietly into a chair. "No! Bad dog!" she scolded, leering, as she wriggled away. "Harry's got a birthday *and* a wedding: we're going shopping!"

Lupin closed his eyes and shook his head. "Adora..." He glanced helplessly at Harry, who sat back and soaked up the whole scene with a glowing smile.

"No use looking to 'im, he's coming too. Now get up, both of you!" She pulled Lupin out of his chair and gave Harry a no-nonsense look. *Resisting will only prolong the agony*, he thought, and obediently got to his feet.

As soon as he Disapparated, Harry was more glad than ever that he'd given his Triwizard Cup winnings to Fred and George. Their shop was by far the liveliest on Diagon Alley, and its colorful cheer did much to offset the gloom of boarded-up storefronts like Ollivander's, or Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. A few other shops were closed as well, but at least there were *some* people strolling the brick street. Harry wondered if the whole alley might have been abandoned, if not for the defiant mischief of "Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes."

They made quite a parade, Harry, Tonks, and Lupin, with their entourage of members of the Order. At least a dozen foreign sorcerers had joined them for the opportunity to see Diagon Alley, while "regulars" like Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt were carefully keeping Harry in their sight. Bystanders watched with wide eyes as they passed, and frequently tagged along after them. Noses began to press against the windows of shops; the show of strength in the street began to set people at ease. Before they had made their way to Gringott's, there were crowds in the Alley again, for the first time in many months.

With a bag full of Galleons (which he hoped would be enough), Harry followed Tonks' advice and stopped first at the joke shop. Having noted a glint in her eye, he suspected he was in for some surprise, and was delighted to find he was correct: Ron stood behind the counter, beaming at Harry as he entered the shop. "About time, mate! Couldn't they get you out of bed today, what?" said Ron, as he abandoned the counter and threw his arms joyfully around his friend.

"Eh, you're still on the clock! Get back to work!" boomed Fred, or George, loudly from the back of the room.

"Think because you're family, you can slack?" asked the other. But even as they teased Ron, they, too, rushed forward to clap Harry convivially on the shoulders.

"You really work for these idiots, Ron?" Harry asked with a wink.

"Can you believe it? We'll hire anything," said one of the twins, as the other casually twisted Ron into a headlock, rubbing his hair with something that instantly caused every strand to stand on end. Ron wrenched himself free, grumbling about his brothers' uncertain parentage, as he unsuccessfully attempted to mash his hair back down.

"Come upstairs, Harry, we've got you something special," said George quietly. He pointed at Ron and said "You! Mind the till!" Ron dropped his jaw to protest, but Fred made some sort of hand motion that Harry missed, and Ron sulkily acceded. The twins half-ushered, half-carried him to the back of the shop before he could protest.

"Dress robes, Harry! We ordered them from China," said Fred, as they clambered noisily up the stairs.

"Pure silk," said George. "Stunning."

"Amazing what nice stuff can come from a worm's behind," commented Fred.

"Guys! Hey! You weren't supposed to buy them for me! I can order things, too, you know--" said Harry, but he was cut off when Fred's hand clamped over his mouth.

"Silence, lad!" George said, as he held open the door at the top of the landing. "We never forget a favor, do we, Fred?"

"Can't let a good deed go unpunished, brother!" With that they flung Harry firmly onto a surprisingly soft couch, where he landed beside a parcel wrapped in red rice paper. Though he could clobber them for spending what was obviously a lot of money on him, he had to admit he could never have found such elegant things on his own. The black robes were incredibly soft, and when he held them up, the light playing across the surface revealed hints of dark green and purple within the fibers. Harry gaped wordlessly at Fred and George.

"Let's see them on you, Harry," said Fred, but Harry was still too busy admiring both the gift (and the goodwill behind it) to pay attention.

"You heard him! Strip!" said George. The two of them raised their eyebrows at each other, and Harry realized his robes and trousers were around his ankles. He'd barely seen either of the twins move.

"All right, all right, geez! I'm glad I put on clean underwear today," he grumbled as he pushed his arms into the new sleeves.

"Us too, mate," said Fred, tugging the back of the robe over his head.

There was a rare moment of silence as both twins regarded him. "Well?" said Harry, though he could tell by their identical smug grins that the robes were a go.

"Sharp, Harry," said Fred.

"We've truly outdone ourselves this time," said George proudly.

They threatened to disintegrate his other robes if he tried to put them back on before showing off their excellent taste to the crew downstairs. Harry hardly had any robes to spare, since Fawkes had just done the same thing to another set. When Tonks and Ron both whistled at him, though, his face grew very warm and he retreated up the stairs.

Harry slumped at the long table in the basement kitchen. He felt like staring at a blank gray wall for the rest of the evening. How Tonks could possibly have kept on shopping was more than he could fathom. It wasn't enough that she'd made him try on dozens of linen shirts and a herd of leather boots. Then she had dragged them all up and down Diagon Alley three times to "help" Harry find a wedding gift: the first time they apparently had to look at every single thing that could possibly be purchased, the second to reexamine a few dozen things she liked best, then finally to dart back and forth indecisively between the last three options. She finally recommended a cauldron made of malachite, which Harry had liked as soon as he'd seen it, hours earlier.

Lupin looked no better, although there was an improved flavor to the exhaustion of the bedraggled boyfriend, compared to the careworn leader of the Order. Though barely more than arm's length from the ice chest, Lupin used his wand to summon two butterbeers to the table, and even made them open themselves. "Cheers, mate," he said as he slid one across to Harry, and they each downed half a bottle in one draught.

"Good birthday, was it?" asked Lupin.

"Bit long."

They stared at grain of the wood table in complete silence, broken only by the gentle thuds as their bottles returned to its surface.

"See the new Firebolts?" asked Harry listlessly.

"Nice," mumbled Lupin.

When Harry's bottle was empty, he gazed up at Lupin without lifting his head. Lupin peered at him through half-lidded eyes and flicked his wand wordlessly to bring out two more.

A pair of Russian witches, loaded down with shopping bags, eventually came down the stairs. They regarded the scene at the table, then each other, finally bursting into giggles. From there, however, the ladies completely ignored them, chattering to each other in their own language as they bustled about the kitchen, clanging pots and cauldrons and unloading groceries. The empty bottles were whisked away and, to Harry's surprise, replaced with plates heaped with steaming food. Sitting down beside

them, the witches handed each of them a bottle bearing an unreadable label. "Kvass," said one, raising her own bottle and pointing at it. Marveling that most of his day had been spent obeying the will of incomprehensible women, Harry clinked his bottle to theirs. "Thank you," he said, hoping they understood.

The one beside Lupin smiled across the table. "*Pazhayul'sta*," she said.

The rich food only made Harry's tired daze more intense, but he felt guilty when the witches shoved him roughly back down in his chair when he tried to help them clean up. "Accept it graciously, Harry," said Lupin. "They won't do it every night, don't worry. But you'll be amazed at the generosity that flows through this house. I just wish Sirius could have felt some of it." They regarded one another sadly.

It happened again. The kitchen disappeared, and Harry was in Lupin's mind. It was different this time, though. After the immense complexity of Fawkes, Harry felt as though Lupin's mind was laid out before him in an orderly tableau, where he was free to wander at will. Presently at the forefront was Sirius. His best friend, abandoned in Azkaban, then imprisoned in his own house, lonely, powerless... then finally stolen for good. Silent tears as he carefully wrapped Sirius's possessions, moved them to the attic, jinxed them against Kreacher's malicious tampering. Tonks. She brought color into his gray life, yet he was terrified that one full moon, she would disappear in a flood of dark red. Deeper than that, the awareness of his thinning hair, his fraying clothes. How long could it last, before someone young, someone with a future, caught her eye and brought her to her senses? Colorless remnants of a dream; Tonks was starving to death, wasting away, crawling through an empty graveyard, calling for Harry Potter...

With the same vertiginous sensation as he'd felt with Mrs. Figg, Harry saw himself through Lupin's eyes. His terrible grief for James had dulled over the years--until he met James' son. All the best parts of James, wrapped up and repackaged with the best of Lily Evans. He hoped desperately that the son would not share the parents' fate, cut down just as they'd begun to bloom. Harry combed through this part of his mind delicately, deliberately, certain he would find jealousy or resentment, but there was none. The dream had been an aberrance, meaningless remains of the day. Lupin held no envy of Harry's youth or wealth. In fact, Harry felt a flicker of envy of the peace at Lupin's core, for his sad but complete acceptance of the twisted path of his fate.

It occurred to Harry that he could withdraw from Lupin's mind of his own accord, and he did so, easing himself back into the kitchen. Lupin was shaking, his eyes wide, his fingers white from their grip on the table. Feeling strangely numb, Harry wondered why he had never felt the fear that was so obviously present in these minds when he touched them. "Why is it so frightening?" he asked evenly.

Lupin drew a stuttering breath and dropped his hands in his lap. It took him a moment to compose an answer. "I guess it shouldn't be... it's not painful." He paused again. "I've done Legilimency, had it done to me... but Harry, there was no wand, no warning! It's... rather a whole new meaning of vulnerability, to find someone else just right there, inside your mind. You can't get much more naked than that."

"I'm sorry, Remus," said Harry, and did a mental double-take; Lupin had never asked him to stop calling him 'Professor Lupin,' but Harry knew he'd been planning to. "This was the first time I've been able to end it on my own, but I still can't control the onset."

Biting his thumbnail absently, Lupin said, "It's okay. I think Ondossi can help you, when she gets back. She's looked me in the eye for a month now and she's never..."

"Violated you?" said Harry, still dispassionate.

Lupin averted his eyes with a mirthless laugh, and took a long pull at his drink before looking at Harry with a disconcerted expression. "That's, uh, that's one way to put it, I suppose. Heavens above, Harry, you're sounding... pretty spooky."

"I *feel* spooky, Remus. I felt it last night, with Fawkes. We were falling so fast, I knew I would die, but I felt... nothing. Not afraid, not angry, just... blank. I don't know what it means."

"Me either." They sat quietly for a moment, and Lupin finished off his bottle.

"Remus?"

"Yes?"

"This house is yours."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'll keep my room, but the house belongs to you now."

Lupin's brows drew together with concern. "What are you--"

Harry interrupted. "I saw the wolf in your mind, Remus. I couldn't go near it. I can't pull it out of you. But I'm tired of watching it drive you. I want you to make this place a home for you and Tonks."

"Harry, I can't accept--"

"You can. Graciously. Goodnight, Remus." Harry pushed back from the table and went upstairs without another word. The Russian witches watched him go, then wondered aloud, in their native tongue, what the boy had said to the man at the table to make him cry so hard.

Harry awoke in his cavelike bedroom feeling like his normal self, but he could perfectly recall the strange way he'd felt the night before with Lupin. At the time, he knew exactly what he was saying and had an excellent reason for saying it. Now, however, the reasons weren't quite so clear anymore, and he felt a bit abashed.

He passed a small group of unknown sorcerers, standing before the screeching portrait of Lady Black. "...just cut out that whole section of wall..." "...paint over the canvas in a solid color..." "...savages, blood traitors..." He shook his head, grinning, as he passed; the portrait was irritating, sure, but at least you always knew exactly what to expect from her.

There was a larger crowd in the kitchen, some of whom he recognized from the trip to the Alley. He dished himself a serving bowl of sweetened rice from the stove, but the table was so loud and full, he decided to duck out into the courtyard to eat it. Lady Black spotted him this time and bellowed her displeasure that he dared to surrender her manor to a non-human, and then it was all fresh grass and sunlight.

Mad-Eye Moody was also dining in the courtyard, leaning against a wall in shadow. Harry gave him an inquisitive look, and Moody beckoned him over, a sunbeam winking off the metal flask in his outstretched hand. Harry had wanted to sit in the grass, but opted to hunker along the wall the same as Moody.

"Mornin', Potter."

Harry discovered that the rice was extremely sticky. The best he could manage was a muffled "Hey." He reflected that he had no idea what to call Moody now--he had a funny feeling he had yet to earn the privilege of 'Alastor.'

"Quite a trip, yesterday," said Moody. Harry nodded and wished he'd thought to bring some water. Moody poked at a scoop of melon on his plate and raised his brow at Harry, who gratefully took a nice juicy piece. As soon as it touched his tongue, however, Harry realized he'd made a huge mistake. He rolled his eyes back into his head and began twitching, more and more violently, then fell facedown into the grass.

He hoped Moody was smiling. When Moody's hat whapped into the back of his head, Harry knew it was safe to get up. "Smart alec," grumbled the professor. "At least you remembered, though it would've been too late to save yourself, of course."

"Come on, don't you feel safe even in here?" asked Harry, even as he realized he had no idea who had fixed the rice he was eating.

"Potter, as of a month ago, I am the oldest living Auror in 300 years. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Happy birthday," said Harry meekly.

Despite the silence and paranoia, Harry enjoyed eating outside with Moody; the old man would have made a classic grandfather, had he lived in a more placid time. Moody offered him more chunks of melon, always with the same gruff manner that belied the kindness behind the gesture.

"It's good to see so many new faces," said Moody distantly. "Lot of sharp heads mulling things over. Slows things a bit, too, though." He set down his plate and regarded Harry carefully. Harry wondered what it would be like to sink into the "mind" of that magical eye, when he felt himself sliding into Moody.

"Ah, ah, ah, boy, no yeh don't." Harry blinked, and needed a moment to realize what just happened, or, more importantly, what *didn't* happen. He was positive he had started to connect to Moody's mind--how could he still be sitting here? Then Harry realized that Moody was grinning so smugly, he bore a slight resemblance to Fred and George.

"You're an Occlumens," Harry said.

"Course I am," scowled Moody. "Though I've never tried it with a Legilimagus, wasn't sure if I could do it without the wand and all. I was hoping you wouldn't mind giving it a go."

"Anytime," Harry replied, feeling an intense flood of relief that at least *someone* had some control over his new power. "You didn't ask the other one, Ondossi?"

Moody gazed pensively into the distance. "Never. I don't trust her. Albus did, rest his soul, but we've all learned even he could be fooled, ha'nt we?" Harry nodded, also lost in memory, grinding his teeth, then changed the subject.

"Are you going to the wedding?"

"Nah," shrugged Moody. "Can't stand 'em. Security nightmare, all those strangers, everyone facing away from the door, food left out unwatched all evening... to say naught of the mushy stuff! They may as well pass out the stilettos at the door, all those idiots hugging and dancing." Harry couldn't help but laugh, Moody was such a grumpy old bachelor.

But then he caught Moody's eye again, and fell into a well of loneliness so deep he couldn't see the bottom before Moody pushed him back out into the courtyard.

Moody immediately pulled his hat down, not to cover the magical eye as was his custom, but the human one. Harry felt the eerie calm begin descend in him, but he shook it off, undoubtedly because the encounter was so quick--but looking squarely at the bulging, vibrating bulb of the "mad eye" was also enough to unsettle anyone. In the absence of the numbing calm, Harry felt very self-conscious again. Unfortunately, he was unable to tell from the old man's distorted features whether he was angry, afraid, or indifferent.

"Quick little prat, you are," Moody finally grumbled, though without rancor.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I don't know how to stop myself. I'm glad that you could stop me."

Moody nodded, shifting his hat back above his brow again. "There's many kinds of powers that can't be controlled, Potter. Take werewolves. I find the ones that fear what they've become are rarely a problem. The ones that relish it... They're the ones I keep me eye on." He peered sternly over his ruined nose at Harry. "Remember that as you go getting your feet wet."

The house quieted down after breakfast, as members of the Order departed to their tasks. Harry had no idea how many people were actually living in the house, or whether it was just a central meeting point that emptied every night. He wandered through the halls a while, careful not to disturb Lady Black, then returned to his room and flopped on his bed to peer out the window. He'd had enough rest, enough play; it was time to get to work.

After sitting quietly for a few seconds, however, he realized that there was a sound coming from his trunk. Flipping it open, he shoved things around until he found the phone. "Hermione?"

"Hi, Harry! I'm so glad you finally answered! How are you?"

"Fine," he said on autopilot. "Well, not exactly fine, more like okay..." So much had happened since the last time he'd spoken to Hermione, it was hard to believe less than two days had passed. It took a long time to fill her in about Fawkes and the latest episodes of Legilimency, then when she found out he'd gone shopping on Diagon Alley, she insisted on hearing all about that as well. Then he remembered something else: "Say, did you know Ron's been working for Fred and George?"

"He has? Not as a product tester, I hope."

Harry chuckled. "I don't know, I just had a few minutes with him; he was behind the counter when I saw him."

"Well! I wonder why he never mentioned it."

Harry had a feeling Ron wasn't particularly proud that he needed to take a paying job when everyone else was on holiday. "Yeah, funny. And you'll never guess where Hagrid is," said Harry, changing the subject.

"Oops, no, not if it's business--just wait and tell me at the wedding. It's only a few more days."

"Yeah. He may even be back to tell us himself. Although I wonder now if I might not make it."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not going to sit around any longer. I thought I'd do a bit of research for the next couple days."

"Oh."

Harry palmed his forehead. It was bad enough he'd slipped in front of Moody with the melon business that morning; he could just feel the cogs winding up in Hermione's mind. *So much for a quiet exit*, he thought.

"I won't ask where you're going, only who else is going with you..." said Hermione pointedly.

Harry wished the cursed batteries on the phone would run out. "Erm, well, I hadn't decided just yet... still in the planning stages--"

"Do NOT tell me you were going to just head off on your own!!"

Harry cleared his throat. "Okay." Another mistake. Little jokes worked on Ron, but they only sent Hermione into overdrive. Holding the phone away from his head helped a little. "Hermione... Herm---- Herm--" It was simply too soon. Harry tossed the phone on the bed so he could rummage properly through his trunk for some traveling clothes.



When the thin droning had noticeably dropped in pitch, he picked it back up. "Okay, look, I see it wasn't a good idea, all right? I'll take someone with me."

"I should think so, too! Where should I meet you?" she demanded.

"Whoa, whoa, you're not--"

"I most certainly am, Harry James Potter! Do you know why? Because I already know you're planning on giving whoever goes with you the slip! I can be in the fireplace at Number Tw--"

Harry interrupted with a violent "Shh!" which meant "zip it" in Parseltongue.

"Sorry," continued Hermione. "I mean, I can be... where you are in half an hour."

"See you then," said Harry, and hung up with a sigh.

"You know," said a snide voice, making Harry jump, "if you don't learn to set your foot down with these womernow, it'll only get worse."

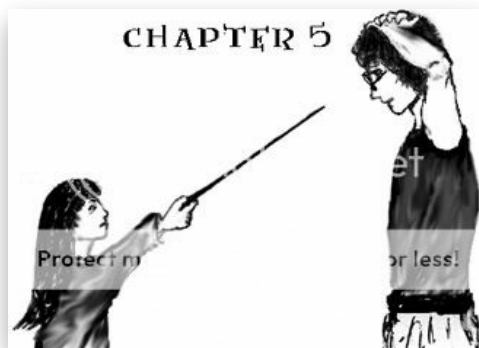
Harry glared at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus near his bed. "Keep snooping and I may set it down right through your canvas."

"Mendicant!" spat Phineas, but he promptly disappeared beyond the left side of the frame.

## 5: Godric's Hollow

*Chapter 5 of 50*

Harry, Ron, and Hermione go on a road trip, and find more questions than they do answers.



Harry packed a backpack with a few essentials and convinced the discomfited Hedwig to let him open her cage without giving him an indignant nip. He scurried down to the kitchen with such noisy vigor that he earned his own private monologue from Lady Black. Finding that Hermione had not yet arrived, Harry briefly considered making a break for it, but fortunately a more primitive part of his psyche (one which avoided pain) won the battle. He'd told her where he was going; if he left without her, she'd hound him like back taxes.

Once the portrait grew bored and quiet again, Harry could barely make out a muffled voice echoing down through the chimney. Slinking up to the drawing room, he found Lupin face first in the fireplace, emerald flames licking ineffectively at his hair. "I know, Rufus, but this doesn't have to be a 'you're either with us or against us' situation. Look, I can't even tell you how tired I am of having this same argument. This conversation is over." Lupin pushed himself out of the fire, flicking his wand sharply to extinguish it and muttering, "Bloody stubborn son of a--"

Harry cleared his throat, causing Lupin to censor himself and whirl around. "Harry! Good morning!" His eyes narrowed as he took in the backpack. "Going somewhere?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly. "Godric's Hollow."

Lupin gave him a measured look, frowning. "Why there? Why now?"

Harry shrugged before he could stop himself. "I'm not sure, Remus, to be honest. I've just had a feeling I need to go there all summer. Longer, even."

Lupin nodded slowly. "I see. Why now?"

"Because if I'm going to make it back for the wedding, I better not tackle something big like a Horcrux just yet," he said with a winsome grin. Lupin smirked, shaking his head and grinning back.

"Can't sit still for four days, can you? That's fine, Harry. But you understand I won't let you go alone?"

"Hermione's already on her way--"

"Without someone from the Order, that is. No, Harry, I mean it, I know you've handled all sorts of scrapes, but you're not ready to face a band of Death Eaters without help. Look what happened back in the Department of Mysteries."

"You know very well that was an ambush, Remus," Harry argued. "Anyone would need help if they walked into a trap. I'm talking about going off somewhere that no one expects, just to have a look around, and a bit of a think."

Lupin folded his arms. "Do I need to point out that trouble always manages to find you?" It was Harry's turn to chuckle.

"Look, I just want keep a low profile. I don't want to go parading in with an honor guard like Diagon Alley; we should have just carried a neon sign saying 'Aim Curses Here.'"

Hermione and I blend in with Muggles better than anyone in the Order. They'll never even know we were there."

Harry realized that Lupin was looking past him, and turned. Mad-Eye Moody was standing in the door, listening intently. "Don't mind me," he said gruffly. "Always love to catch a bit of suicidal ranting whenever I get the chance."

Harry sighed. He never, ever should have answered that stupid phone. "Anyone else want to butt in?"

"I think I'm it," said Moody, "but we can wake Lady Black if you're set on a third opinion."

Lupin was staring off with a thoughtful expression. He turned back with a furrowed brow. "I wonder... Listen, Harry, I actually agree, it's easier to hide one or two than ten. Alastor, you're the surveillance expert, what can we do to keep an eye on him from here? So we can get to him quickly if there's trouble--particularly if he can't ask for help?"

Moody pondered that a moment. "Heh. Interesting question. A Foe-glass, you think? That would reflect what's around Harry, from far away... trouble is, that's focused magic, it'd be a compass needle pointing straight at 'im, to the right eyes. Need something more subtle."

"Sirius had something like that," mused Lupin as he stroked his chin. "He and James had these mirrors they'd enchanted. I found one of them when I was... putting away his things."

Harry once had the other one, but he had broken it in a fury.

"I never asked them how they did it," Lupin said thoughtfully. "They were the only ones who could use them; even for me, they were just mirrors. What do you think, Alastor?"

When Moody scowled hard enough with that battle-worn face, it resembled a lumpy bowl of porridge more than anything else. "S'gotta be a charm of some kind. A quick word with Flitwick." He stoked the emerald flames back to life, stepped into them, and disappeared.

Harry excused himself to check the kitchen fireplace. Hermione had just climbed out, and to Harry's surprise, Ron was right behind her. "You're coming too?!" he exclaimed with delight.

"If I don't get a break from Fred and George, I'm going to commit fratricide," said Ron, wrapping Harry in a bear hug.

"I'm sorry we were so long," said Hermione. "Mum insisted on packing sandwiches, and then we had to pick up some Muggle clothes for Ron."

"No worries!" said Harry. "I'm waiting on Moody anyway." As if on cue, Moody's characteristic step-thump, step-thump resounded on the stairs.

"Done and done!" boomed Moody, holding out a little round pendant on a chain. "Wear this, missy, an' don't let 'Arry out of your sight." Hermione took it from him, peering at it dubiously as she slipped the chain over her head. It was clear from her focus that she was looking into a mirror, but when she tipped it at Harry, he jumped. To him, the whole pendant consisted of Moody's magical eye.

"That's just nasty," said Harry, a bit too taken aback for niceties. Moody snorted in disdain; the sound came to Harry from both Moody and the locket.

Hermione looked at them uncertainly, as did Ron. "What?" she asked.

"Never mind," said Harry.

Hermione shook her head quizzically, raising the pendant high as she pulled the front of her blouse away from her throat. "DON'T put it in there," Harry gasped, when he realized her intent.

Moody snorted. "I'll have you know, Potter, I'm a gentleman," he said (in stereo).

When Harry explained the nature of the pendant, Hermione regarded it as though it had suddenly sprouted hundreds of hairy tentacles. She peeked up at Moody with an even more aghast expression; he simply folded his arms and winked at her. Ron had to cover his mouth with his hands to keep from laughing.

"Oh, that's right, if it's so funny, YOU wear it!" Hermione told Ron.

"But it doesn't go with my outfit," Ron protested with a chortle.

The three of them flew on broomsticks to Godric's Hollow under a Disillusionment Charm. This was carefully applied by Moody, and set to reverse itself when they landed. They were heading to the West Country, a lovely rural area with rolling hills and thatched cottages. Hermione took it upon herself to give them a rather academic introduction during their trip.

"All that's known about the Gryffindor family is that they were 'of wild Moor,' probably North Yorkshire. Obviously that's some distance from here, so it's really not certain at all why this would be named Godric's Hollow. If in fact it refers to Godric Gryffindor, though it's hard to imagine who else it could be. According to *Hogwarts: A History*, Godric's older brother found some powerfully magical object in the West Country, which contributed directly to the location they chose for Hogwarts. It may have been some sort of compass, or map. At any rate, this area undoubtedly became precious to their family after that, which is presumably why it's called Godric's Hollow."

"Yeah, well, there's also Dartmoor, where we're practically heading right now," said Ron. He ought to know, thought Harry, the Burrow was in the West Country as well. "Maybe it's called Godric's Hollow because he LIVED there."

"Of course!" Hermione snapped. "Maybe the Burrow was actually the Gryffindor family seat! Just because every knowledgeable sorcerer in Britain believes the Gryffindors are from Yorkshire..." Harry leaned into the wind until he couldn't hear the bickering anymore.

They had their pick of secluded spots in which to land. The village proper was only a few dozen houses; the rest of the Hollow comprised the wide open spaces of pastures and farms. They set down in a copse of elm trees and stowed their brooms in a long canvas bag made for Muggle skis. It would not be easy to explain why they would be hauling skis around the countryside in August, but better skis than brooms.

Since the sun was already on the horizon, they set out right away to find the Wizard tavern that Lupin had recommended. He had instructed them to walk to the north end of town along the main road, then perform a Revealing Charm on the back stairs of the Muggle schoolhouse on the left. They had landed just east of town, so this seemed straightforward enough. Unfortunately, when they reached the north end of town, they found a maze of chainlink fences and scaffolding. A bulldozer was parked on what was probably the former foundation of the school.

The three of them exchanged glances. "Three cheers for progress," groaned Harry.

"Do you suppose the entrance could still be there, under the rubble?" said Hermione.

Ron stared hard at the razed lot. "Hard to tell. It could be--all this is just Muggle construction. Though it'd be odd for the innkeeper to just sit tight and let them build Merlin-knows-what over his front door. I suppose it's worth a look, though." Ron dropped the bag of brooms and clambered easily over the flimsy fence.

"Ron! You're trespassing!" said Hermione reprovingly, but he trotted off in the twilight, wand in hand. Harry shrugged; they didn't have a lot of options, and now that it was getting dark, he'd much prefer to get indoors.

They watched as Ron navigated the dusty ground, stopping occasionally to mutter, "*Aperio*." He paced carefully around the big machines, even prodding the ground with his wand once or twice. He finally turned back to the others with a shrug, and called softly, "Nothing here!" To their surprise, the earth beneath Ron's feet promptly vanished, and he dropped completely out of view.

The two of them vaulted over the chainlink and had their heads over the edge of the hole in an instant. Ron was still on his feet, leaning against the side of a pit about eight feet deep. "That was rude!" he observed indignantly.

"What did you do?" demanded Hermione.

"I didn't do anything!" Ron sputtered. "The bloody ground just Vanished and dumped me in here. Oh," he said, noticing that he was standing before a battered looking doorway that led right into the earth. "I think I found the inn, though."

Ron flipped over a piece of cardboard hanging by a loop of string on the door. "*Lumos*," he said, pointing his wand at the sign. "The Green Dragon Inn is closed. Regretfully, The Management." He scowled up at Harry and Hermione. "Well, that's nice!"

Harry sat down at the edge of the pit. "Now what are we going to do?" he sighed.

Hermione knelt beside him. "Try the door anyway. Maybe the proprietor still lives there, we could at least ask where we might go next."

Ron nodded gamely, and knocked. The door swung inward about six inches. Ron immediately leapt in the other direction, to the far wall of the pit. When nothing else happened, however, he began to crane his neck in an attempt to peer beyond the door.

"Ron!" said Hermione urgently. "Climb out now!"

"Relax," he said. "There's a light somewhere in the back. Hello?" he called, and poked his head in the doorway.

"*RON!*" she hissed, but he merely waved behind his back at her in annoyance.

"Excuse me!" called Ron. "Is there anyone here?" He nudged the door wide open, letting his wand shine into the interior. There were a few dusty broken chairs in the room, and a countertop bar across the back wall. Ron stepped inside cautiously, but he saw nothing else; no bottles or mugs on the shelves, no wood in the bin by the fireplace. There was a light though, shining around the jamb of a door behind the bar. Ron pondered this a moment, then backed cautiously to the entryway. "I want to go knock on the back door," he called softly over his shoulder. "Harry, hop down here and watch my back, all right? Harry?"

Ron was suddenly saturated in adrenaline. He flung his back against the tavern wall, hissing "*Nox!*" to extinguish his wand. His throat constricted as he realized that Harry's feet were no longer dangling into the pit.

Everything was silent. Ron glanced quickly at the back door to assure himself it was still closed and the room still empty. He slipped quietly into the doorway and, from the darkness, scanned above the rim of the pit. Harry and Hermione were standing beside one another, and some sort of spotlight was trained on Harry's face.

Ron checked the back door again; it was still closed. He could Apparate out of the hole, perhaps ten, twenty feet on the side opposite his friends. That might put him behind whoever was holding the light. Then again, it might not, but the further away he went, the more difficult it would be to aim a hex. He might only have time for one shot. But if he could get the light off Harry and Hermione, they might be able to react. Twenty feet, then; he pictured the spot in his mind and Apparated.

Ron Disapparated with a loud crack, to find himself standing a few feet behind an old man, Muggle in appearance, beaming a powerful flashlight at Harry. Ron had his wand ready, but hesitated; something didn't feel right. The old man was shaking so hard that the batteries were rattling inside the flashlight. There was nothing in his other hand, no wand, no weapon. He hadn't even reacted to the sound from Ron's Disapparation.

Warily, Ron concealed his wand with his arm as best he could. "Do you need help, sir?" he asked, walking up to the old man as though he were some concerned passerby.

The man jumped and looked at Ron with wide, frightened eyes. "D-do you see that?" he asked in a high pitched voice, pointing at Harry.

Ron looked over at his friends in alarm. There was nothing behind them, nothing threatening them as far as he could tell. The combination of wands with Muggle clothes looked a bit odd, but didn't seem to justify the amount of fear in the old man. "Um, yes... there's two people there," he said cautiously.

"You see the man, then? Black hair?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?" His voice was becoming more urgent.

"Yes, I'm sure!" Ron was beginning to get irritated. "What's the game, then?"

"Lad," whispered the old man, "right there, that's a ghost, sure as I live and breathe. I'd know him anywhere, he was murdered nigh twenty years ago. James Potter."

Ron couldn't help but giggle with relief. "That's *Harry* Potter, sir. James's son."

"What?"

"Look at the eyes, sir. You'll see what I mean."

"Heavens above! Come here to me, lad!" The old man absently stuffed the flashlight into Ron's hands and approached Harry with his arms wide. He seemed so utterly delighted that Harry didn't have the heart to be dismissive. The old man put his hands on Harry's shoulders and looked at him in wonder. "Harry Potter. Who else could you be, you're just the image of the two of them. Hee hee!" Harry was suddenly being squeezed and clapped on the back, which felt incredibly awkward, but he patted the fellow gamely in return and hoped he'd let go soon.

"Look at me," the man said, stepping back, "cuddling you up like yer still a sprog. And you won't even remember me, do you, lad?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't."

"Ah, you was just a tot. Oh, lad, what a joy, never even thought you were alive, thought you were lost that night. I've got to get you home to my Birdie, she won't believe it's you. Can you come, Harry?"

"I, uh, where, exactly?"

The old man smiled fondly. "Ah, lad, never mind an old fool like meself. Name's Everett Gamidge. My Birdie and I knew your mum and dad. You once pulled all the buds off my prize rosebush!"

Harry smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gamidge. Again."

A brick path wound through a garden full of flowers before it came to the front door of the Gamidge's cottage. In his excitement, Everett had stomped straight through the

beds to throw open the door and call his "Birdie," but Harry, Ron, and Hermione agreed with a glance to take the path. All three were somewhat relieved to see that Birdie was not a winged creature, but a plump, jolly matron with long white hair. She looked hale and sturdy, with dirt under her nails that must have come from those very flower beds. When Harry stepped in the cottage, he caught a whiff of cooked cabbage and cut flowers that didn't spark a specific memory so much as a *certainly* that he'd been here before.

After a round of warm introductions, Birdie piled a tray full of sandwiches and fruit and sent everyone into the living room to empty it. When Harry managed to confess, around a mouthful of ham and swiss cheese, that they had no place to sleep that night, the Gamidges insisted they stay in the cottage. Hermione was assigned to the small guest bedroom, and Birdie built nests for Ron and Harry in the living room.

"Your mum and dad were as dear as our very own, Harry," she said, sorting an armful of throw pillows into two piles. "We met them, what, nineteen years ago. James was out walking and he saw my Everett slip and fall--that sort of thing can mean the end, you know, for a brittle old fool. I was in town when it happened. James helped him into the house and fetched your mum. She brought over something she'd cooked up, set him right as rain, praises be."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who raised a suspicious brow. If the old man had broken his hip, Lily must have concocted some sort of mending potion, like the ones Madam Pomfrey had in the hospital wing. I wonder what the Ministry would say about a witch secretly giving Muggles a medicinal potion, thought Harry. I doubt they'd approve... and I don't think I really care, or that Mom did either.

Birdie continued. "They were such a lovely couple. I'd look out the window on a frosty morning and there'd be James, salting the bricks so it wouldn't be too slick for us to take our walk. Never asked him to do it, he just saw the need and took it on himself to do what needed doing. The sort that keeps the world going round, I always say."

"And then you come along, Harry!" said Everett. "Hohoo, such a little armful! Our own have gone off to live in the big cities, you know, we've two in London and one in Copenhagen, so the grandchildren only came around so often, but you were Birdie's little sprog! Sometimes your mum and dad had to go off for a day or two, on business, and Birdie would go roost at your house for the night. They were so protective of you, they wouldn't even hear of having you come sleep here."

"Oh, Grandad," said Birdy affectionately, "you know how many things a baby needs; we'd have to haul it in a wagon over and back. Much easier for me to go there, where it was all put away and orderly. You were one to go through clothes, Harry-lad, always wriggling out of your diaper, you were."

"Piddled on me prize rosebush your first birthday," Everett grumbled, "though you could barely even walk at the time." Ron bellowed with laughter, as Harry began to wonder if this alleged prize rosebush had survived him.

At breakfast the next morning, Harry took a more serious tack with the Gamidges. "I was wondering if you could help me find my parents' graves today."

"Of course, lad," said Birdie, as she poured him more tea. "Grandad will have to do that, I can't get up the hill like I used to. You've never been up to them before?" Harry shook his head. Birdie frowned. "Good heavens, your auntie never took you? What's the matter with her?"

Harry didn't have an answer.

Everett spoke up. "I saw her at the funeral. Looked all pinched, she did, like she couldn't spare a drop of kindness for no one. Opposite of Lily. She never once mentioned she had you, Harry, we were all sure you were lost under the rubble. An' not a dry eye in the town, the whole family gone at once like that." He barely concealed the resentment in his voice.

"Now, Ev, you don't *know* she just did it to be ornery," chirped Birdie. "Maybe she was afraid they'd come after the poor tyke. Thought it safer to just let him be dead to the world."

"Who's 'they'?" said Harry, trying not to convey his desire for revenge along with his curiosity.

"Why, the ones who murdered James and Lily!"

Harry sat bolt upright in his chair, jostling the tea tray. "Do you know about them?"

Birdie glanced anxiously at Everett, pressing her lips flat. The old man scratched his balding head, then leaned forward to speak directly to Harry.

"Harry-lad," he said carefully, "I can see your auntie has kept all this from you, and she may have been right to do it. But don't get yourself worked up, lad. There's not much to tell, 'twas never solved, never even found a suspect, to my knowledge."

"Anything you could tell me would be very important to me," said Harry simply and sincerely.

"Aye, lad, that I guessed all by meself," said Everett gently. He sighed, settling back in his chair and reaching for a pipe, which he lit and puffed several times with a faraway expression before he spoke again.

"It was Halloween, so Birdie and I had been up handing out sweets, o'course. It got late but I wasn't sleeping too well--" ("Too much candy upset his stomach," whispered Birdie confidentially) "--and suddenly I hears this *kaboom*, just a terrible deep sound, really. I knew something 'orrible had happened. Thought perhaps some kids had gone out to make mischief, and came across a piece of live ordnance from the Great War. You hear about that sort of thing happening now and again.

"I woke my Birdie, but she wouldn't hear a word of it, said I was being a tom fool. But I knew that weren't no innocent little firecracker! I felt the hum of it in me bones, it had power behind it. I headed off toward town, but I couldn't see a thing, no fire, nothing. I rounded the hill, though, that was between your folks' house and ours, and there it all was. The house was just gone, not burning, not crumbling; it was spread out as though the sky itself had smashed it flat and then went on its merry way. I just stood there with my mouth open, thinking I had to be dreaming. How could a house just collapse into rubble, without a trace of fire or machinery, not even a hailstone?"

Harry recalled number four, Privet Drive for a moment; even that had involved a lot of charred wood.

Everett continued. "It was dark, of course, but I could hear movement. I thought it might be one of them, you know, trying to get out. I tried to get in there, to help, but it was just heaps of glass, rubble everywhere, you know, no place to get your footing." His voice began to shake, and he took another puff on the pipe. "I finally had to get up the hill, just to get a decent look into it all, see where they were, how I could get to them.

"By the time I got high enough to look into the pile, I could see a man at the far edge of it all, pulling out a body. I didn't get a very good look, but I could tell it wasn't Lily or James. Too big to be either of them. The bloke pulling on it was just hauling it over all that shrapnel without a thought in the world for the way it was ripping to shreds. I thought at first he was trying to save someone, but no one would be so careless. That's when I caught on that he was pulling out a cadaver, and in a hurry too.

"I knew there weren't any good reason to do such a thing, so I goes back down the hill and around the pile to confront him. He must have had a car right there, running, because they were both gone in the two minutes it took me to get down there. Not a trace.

"Of course, then it hits me that good heavens, Lily and James are still in there, what was I doing chasing after these blokes! The sirens were coming from town, the police could see to those two. I headed back up the hill; I figured if they made it, they'd be trying to push their way out from under the roof. When I turned around to look down..."

"Yes?" said Harry.

"I've never told this to no one, Harry, because until las' night, I didn't believe it myself. I thought I must have swooned." He cast a somewhat guilty glance at Birdie, who was glaring at him reproachfully. "The most enormous bloke I've ever seen was wadin' through the rubble like it was no more than a snowdrift. Looked like he was half bear, he did. He picked up a section of the roof that must've weighed a hundred kilos and just lofted it up like the lid to the toilet. It was sitting on the top of your little crib, Harry-lad,

and you were laying inside it like a pea in its pod in the midst of it all. I even heard your little cry. He picked you up just so tender and carried you out... and then he handed you to... another bloke." He looked up uncertainly, as Birdie shook her head with growing incredulity.

Harry leaned forward. "I believe you. The giant... fellow, we know him. His name's Hagrid, and he does look like he's half bear."

"The big half," said Ron quietly.

"And the other one, let me guess," said Harry carefully, "he was on a motorcycle."

Everett's eyes grew as wide as the teacups on the tray. For a moment, he was too astounded to speak. "That... that's right, lad! I knew I had to be seein' things, 'cause I *knew* neither of them was there before I went up the hill, and yet I didn't hear or see a thing approaching, least of all a big chopper like that one. Good heavens, you know him, too?"

"Yes," said Harry in a choked voice. "That was my godfather, Sirius Black."

Both Everett and Birdie jumped. "I know that name!" said Birdie. "Lily spoke of him! We never met him, but they said he was a dear friend."

"Harry, I can't believe it... all those years I thought I'd lost me mind! But how did they--"

"I don't know," said Harry, hoping desperately that Everett wouldn't press him for explanations. "They've never really told me much about that night either. Aunt Petunia never let me see much of them," he added plaintively, and it wasn't exactly a lie.

Everett trembled all over for a moment, then puffed a few more times on his pipe. "I'll be," he said musingly, then finally looked back up at Harry. "Well, the big one, Hagrid, you say?" Harry nodded. "Hagrid... he waded back in right away, and found poor Lily right by your little cot. He let out a cry such as I'd never heard when he pulled the rubble off and found her dead. The other one, Sirius, jumped up like he meant to dive in there too, but he was so busy holding you. By then, though, the coppers were arriving, and the fire engine, fat lot of good it did, but I reckon they heard the boom and figured there had to be a fire.

"Anyway, the two of them lit out of there faster than anything I ever seen. Sirius just spun his motorbike around and roared straight toward the woods. Another reason I thought I'd dreamed it all; he was gone so quickly, with no road and a babe in his arms--it made no sense, unless he was some kind of angel that flew off with you. But even on Halloween, you don't think of angels as riding on a chopper! I didn't see where the big one went. I watched the bike, you see, thinking it was going to crash, with you on it--but there was no sound of crashing or anything at all, and by the time I looked back, Hagrid was just flat *gone*.

"The police came and pulled your poor mum out of the wreckage. They didn't find your pa 'til the next morning, when they could get a crane out. And o'course, no sign of you, but when they did find your little crib, it was crushed to matchsticks." Birdie nodded. "I thought I must have seen an angel," said Everett softly.

"I told the detectives about the third body, and the fellow pulling it out. They said they'd look into it. All the rescuers had trampled everything hunting for James, just on the off-chance, you know, so any footprints or tire tracks were wiped out. I never thought they put much stock into my story. Yet another reason not to mention the rest, why give them even more reason to think I was off my nut, eh?

"I think they finally blamed it on a 'gas line explosion.' But I know it was foul play, lad; those two that rushed off, they had a mean look to them. They were wearing long black robes, as if they'd come from a Halloween party, or, more like, some kind of secret society or summat. The sort of thing you read about and figure it's all rubbish--but when you someone sneak off a cadaver from a ruined house, you wonder just what's going on in hidden places."

Everett sighed sadly and patted Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry, lad. Not much for answers. Come on, I'll take you up to the cemetery. You can have a good think up there in the quiet."

Harry nodded, then said, "I'd like to bring some flowers."

Birdie patted his cheek tenderly. "There's clippers in the shed out back. Take all you want, love, but I think you'll find you won't need many."

She was right. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the hill behind Everett, they didn't have to guess which graves must belong to the Potters. They were covered with flowers, the oblong diamond shapes of coffins perfectly outlined before two granite headstones. Birdie must have had something to do with this, but Harry knew the manicured perfection was not merely the product of muggle efforts.

Harry didn't need to ask his friends to let him go up to the graves alone. They exchanged the briefest glance amongst themselves, then Ron squeezed his shoulder warmly as he and Hermione turned wordlessly to a shaded bench nearby. Harry found himself oddly numb as he plodded up the hill, not the even calm he felt after performing Legilimency, but a sort of strained emptiness. I should be crying, he thought, or angry, *something*, he thought, yet nothing was coming to the surface.

There was a rosebush growing between the headstones, and as Harry approached, he saw a small granite marker below it. Walking up the grassy aisle between the plots, he bent on one knee to read the inscription:

In memory of Harry James Potter

lost to us with his parents

the candle that burns brightest

burns also fastest

Harry stared at the little rough-cut stone. I'm standing on my own grave, he mused ruefully for a moment. With a sudden angry impulse, he reach for the marker, meaning to hurl it as far as he could. But he stayed his hand, instead falling back to sit crosslegged on the ground and stare at it thoughtfully. He *had* been lost that night, ripped from not only the Muggle world, but the Wizard world as well; removed, along with Voldemort, into a separate universe. He *had* burned very brightly, opposite the utter darkness. Whether he was bright enough, or fast enough, remained to be seen.

Harry sat a long time between the headstones, breathing in the scents of roses and honeysuckle, and countless other flowers. He put a tentative hand to the ground over what was once his mother's head, wondering if there was some way to reach her with Legilimency. There was nothing there, though, not even a hint of presence--just a peaceful hillside where flowers went about their business turning sunshine into life.

"Here he comes," said Hermione quietly to Ron. They had assured Everett that they would find their own way back, and his shiny pate had already disappeared behind the hill. Hermione was a bit nonplussed to see that Harry had not been crying. She opened her mouth, but rather than speak, she just stood up and gathered him in her arms. He stood there woodenly, neither pulling away nor returning her embrace, conceding only to rest his chin against the side of her head. Ron made a few arrested attempts to place a comforting hand on Harry's back, then resolutely put his arms around them both.

Harry finally extracted himself. Though his eyes were dry, his voice broke when he tried to speak, and he had to cough to clear his throat. "I'm done here. I'd like to go back to that tavern, check out that light you saw, Ron." Ron nodded pointedly; he, too, wanted to hear a Wizard's perspective of Everett's story if one could be found.

The construction site was full of workers, but most were taking a lunch break. Harry and Hermione got under the Invisibility Cloak--there was just no way they could all three fit anymore, and since Hermione had that pendant that linked them to Moody, they all agreed she should stay with Harry--and carefully made their way to the spot where the pit had formed the night before. Harry planned to just walk up and stand on it as Ron had, but Hermione put her hand on his arm.

"*Aperio* Green Dragon!" she said softly, waving her wand, and in a much more civilized fashion, stairs appeared beneath their feet. They descended cautiously, as the only stairs they could see were directly beneath the cloak; the dirt outside the perimeter looked unchanged, as though the steps were leading straight into solid ground. But as they went further, new steps appeared, and finally they had gone far enough to see the entire staircase stretching before them, beneath what looked like a nearly transparent, tan canopy covering the familiar pit from last night.

Harry approached the door and knocked loudly, ignoring the cardboard sign. He and Hermione exchanged a frown. The bulldozer had started up again; it would take a miracle for anyone inside to hear a knock. Hermione shrugged and made a face, then pushed the door open wide.

"Hello?" called Harry into the public room, which was apparently used the same window charms as the Ministry of Magic, for daylight seemed to be streaming in despite the fact that the tavern was entirely underground. He stepped inside gingerly, looking for the back door Ron had mentioned. "Anyone here? I'm looking for Wizards--"

"You found one," said a voice from behind the door.

Harry jumped and spun around, to find himself facing a very small witch with a very long wand. He quickly raised both hands and took a step back into the light from the doorway, hoping that Hermione would keep out of sight. At that point, he realized that she couldn't help but do just that: he had walked out from under the Cloak to enter the tavern, leaving her entirely covered with it. A small part of his mind filed that maneuver away for future use.

The rest of him, however, peered down somewhat anxiously at a girl who could only be seven years old at most, glaring up at him with suspicious and frightened eyes. The wand was vibrating in midair from her trembling hands.

"Hi. Is there a grownup here?" said Harry politely.

"None of your beeswax!" said the girl loudly. "What do you want?"

Harry couldn't suppress a smile. "I'm trying to find some other Wizards is all. I'm... new in town, sort of, I just wanted to talk to people."

The girl eyeballed him warily. "My mummy said to Stun anyone that came through that door."

Harry nodded. "Well, you better do it, then. Do you know how?"

"Of course I know how!" she said with disdain.

Harry waited expectantly, resting his hands in a more comfortable position on top of his head. The girl wrinkled her whole face in concentration, then finally said, "*Stupid fly*." She looked absolutely dejected when nothing happened.

Harry furrowed his brow. "When I want to stun someone, I say 'stupefy,' you know. It's just one word."

"Stupa~~fly~~," she said, flicking the wand.

"No 'L'," said Harry, then, slowly, "Stoop-eh-fie."

"Stupefy," she said, and the wand gave a bit of a hum. She began jumping up and down, a gap-toothed grin from ear to ear.

"You almost got it! That's great! Settle down and concentrate, though, and point your wand."

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" she shouted, and two red bolts of energy lobbed past Harry's left elbow, one carving a tidy hole in the edge of the door.

"Look at you!" Harry cheered. "But you never aim at the head--"

"I know, I know," she said sullenly. "I'll take someone's eye out."

"No, no, it's just easier to hit someone when you aim for their chest or middle. Those are bigger."

The young witch nodded with solemn comprehension, then beamed at Harry. "Can you play?" she asked amiably, apparently deciding to forego the actual stunning process.

At that same moment, however, two grown-up sorcerers came bursting through the back door of the tavern. Harry kept his hands firmly on his head and hoped they would ask questions first before resorting to wands. His new little friend looked quite dismayed; this was worse than getting caught with her hand in the cookie jar, thought Harry.

"Calliope," said the man in a frigid tone, "back away from him. Now." She obeyed, glancing guiltily between Harry and the man, presumably her father.

"What do you mean, barging in here?" asked the woman. "The sign says we're closed."

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I was hoping to find some Wizards. I didn't know where else to look."

"You a Wizard, then?" said the man menacingly.

"Yes." Harry figured he'd better play it cool and simple for the moment.

"Turn where I can see you." Harry obeyed. "Do I know you?" But even as he said it, the woman gasped in recognition; this was one of the rare moments that Harry was glad he had his scar.

"Uther, that's *Harry Potter!*" she said in astonishment.

Explanations followed, and after a quick trip under the Invisibility cloak to fetch Ron, Uther and his wife Lachesis un-Vanished tables and chairs in the public room and set out a chicken pie for lunch. Calliope curled contentedly in Harry's lap, ignoring the food in favor of a toy dragon. Harry felt a bit ashamed that he waited for his hosts to eat several bites before trying some himself, but Moody's magical eye had glared at him from Hermione's pendant. Something told Harry that the Auror would be in the room in an instant if he just picked up his fork and dug in.

Harry finally asked his hosts if they had been in Godric's Hollow the night his parents were killed. They had. "We were asked to help modify the Muggles' memories that night," said Lachesis. "Uther used to be at the Ministry. We wanted to get out of the city before we raised a family. We'd barely had time to settle in before You-Know-Who struck right on our doorstep."

"Did they modify Everett Gamidge?" asked Harry pointedly. Uther and Lachesis eyed each other apprehensively.

"I was assigned to him, Harry," said Uther cautiously. "He told me what he saw, and I looked at the memory. I... understood it much better than he did." Harry leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table, but Uther stared at the scraps on his plate, rubbing his chin. He exhaled heavily and ordered Calliope out of the room, which naturally met significant resistance. Lachesis finally persuaded her to help bake a cake for Harry, and ushered her through the back door.

"Harry, you have to understand," said Uther, "only my wife knows about this. Everett and Birdie are from an old, old family, they're pillars in this community, and I respect them. But the old man saw more than he ever should that night--and I saw more than I should, when I checked his memory."

"He'd arrived just minutes after it had happened. He saw someone lugging You-Know-Who's body out of the rubble. I couldn't believe it the first time I went through it, or the second or third, for that matter. But there was no mistake, Everett got a very good look at his face. The other one, though..." Uther paused, grinding his teeth.

Harry waited, never dropping his gaze from Uther.

"Ev didn't see the other one. He had a big hat on, and he was leaning down to drag the body; his face was completely in shadow. But he was pulling the body into a car. A *Ministry* car, Harry! I hadn't been gone from the Ministry six months when this happened, I'd know them anywhere.

"If only there'd been a bit more light! All I could see was the shape, not a single other detail. Ev didn't even register the car, he was so fixated on the two men, but I could spot it in the background of his memory. The poor gaffer, he shuffled back down the hill as fast as he could, but they were long gone by the time he got there. Of course, if they'd seen him, they'd have killed him on the spot. He was lucky."

Uther paused uncomfortably. "I knew Sirius Black. He and Potter came in here a few times after we took over the management. And everyone who's been to Hogwarts since the Great Muggle War knows Hagrid. I never believed a word in the *Prophet* about Black after the way Hagrid handed that little baby to him. Especially not after seeing someone at the top of the Ministry hauling off You-Know-Who. You never read about *that* in the *Prophet*, did you?"

The acid from Harry's stomach was doing a slow, burning climb up his throat. "Someone from the Ministry pulled him out of the rubble." Uther nodded. "To hide the fact that he'd been killed?"

Uther cocked his head. "Could be. Who knows? Maybe they just wanted a private trophy. But there was no one else there yet, *no one*. That car didn't have *time* to just happen upon the scene, not to mention get right in and find You-Know-Who just like that. The car, and the driver, had been there all along, Harry, waiting outside when the house was destroyed."

"And they went in to pull out Voldemort, not Lily or James!" said Hermione in a shocked voice. Uther nearly knocked his chair over backwards when she said the name.

"Come on, now, it's nothing new," said Ron in disgust. "There's always been Death Eaters infiltrating the Ministry. Rookwood. Crouch--or at least his son. Malfoy--he may not be a Minister but you can bet he could borrow a car any time he wanted, right up 'til he got tossed into Azkaban."

Harry nodded. It was not hard to imagine someone like Malfoy borrowing a Ministry car for an evening. "It's true, it might not have been a Minister."

Uther shook his head. "Perhaps not, but I'll tell you one thing: that car wasn't from the general fleet. It was a private Ministry automobile, and those only belong to high-ranking officials. Someone up at the top of the Ministry of Magic had You-Know-Who's body in their car, and whether they did the driving or just lent it to a 'friend,' they never let that fact be known."

Uther shook his head. "I didn't know what to do except keep it quiet. They'd have no qualms about doing to me and mine what they did to the Potters! I sent Everett home and filed a false report about his memory and the mods I'd done. All I did was blank out the fact that he and I had spoken. I left the truth there, intact.

"By the time Ev got out of bed the next day, the Ministry was long gone and the Muggle detectives weren't interested in a dotty old man's story about a third body being hauled from the scene. I guess he figured out for himself that no one was going to buy the parts about giants and motorcycles driving through trees."

Uther spoke urgently. "Harry, you can't go back to the Gamidges. I'm going over there now to get your things and modify both their memories; I'll have to just cut out the last twenty-four hours. They can't walk around town, telling people that they saw Baby Harry all grown up."

Harry's jaw fell. "But they were so happy!" he protested in a squeaky voice.

"They were happy before they saw you, too. But if You-Know-Who *or* the Ministry gets wind of this, they'll be dead. And probably not quickly, unless they're lucky."

Everyone at the table sat in silence for a moment as that sank in.

"But," said Hermione miserably, "what would Vol-sorry, You-Know-Who even be doing here? That was sixteen years ago!"

Uther waved his hand at the interior of the tavern. "Why do you think we're closed down? Three weeks ago, a man came in here asking about the Potters. Did anyone still live here who had known them, where could those people be found, that sort of thing. He didn't have a Dark Mark, but he looked as though he were either under the Imperius or a mortal threat. He was a nervous wreck, stuttering and twitching; mixing up his words; winking and shaking his head after he'd ask something as though to say 'don't answer that.' Cleared the whole place out. I told him I'd just taken over the inn when the Potters were killed, that I'd had no time to get to know them at all, which was all true. I just left off everything about the Gamidges. The next morning, the bloke pays his bill and leaves, shaking all over. An hour later, the schoolhouse explodes right over our heads. Thank goodness it was summer holiday!"

All three of them sat back, dumbstruck. Uther nodded. "I've always had top-of-the-line protective spells on this place, for sixteen years. I knew that wasn't the last we'd see of trouble."

At that point, Calliope burst through the back door, proudly carrying a slightly lopsided cake. "'Zert time!" she announced. Uther slipped out the back door to visit the Gamidges while Calliope carefully sliced and served cake to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. She scraped a huge section of frosting onto her own plate.

"I heard Daddy telling you about that man," she said coily. Harry simply nodded, not certain that his host would appreciate him interrogating his little girl. Fortunately, that was all the prompting she required. "I knew who he was."

The three of them nearly crashed their heads together as they leaned forward eagerly at this bit of news.

"Mummy and Daddy didn't recognize him, but I've seen him before. Back on Diagon Alley. He was the man from the ice cream store."

"Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour?" said Harry cautiously.

"Yep! We used to go there when I was *little*. He was nice, he always gave me all the sauce as I wanted on my sundaes."

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione. Florean Fortescue had disappeared more than a year earlier. "Calliope, do you think you could get me a glass of milk for my cake, please?"

The door had barely swung closed on the hem of her robes when Hermione spoke up. "I've had a theory about this for a long time. You used to hang around at Fortescue's, Harry, that time you stayed at the Leaky Cauldron?"

"Yeah. He gave me ice cream all day. And helped me with an essay I was working on."

"It probably looked, at least to passersby, that you two had become friends, don't you think?"

Harry glanced at her, then Ron. "I suppose. He came out and talked whenever things were quiet."

Hermione turned a bit pale. "Now, Harry, I don't want you to get all defensive about this, but I think he might have been taken so Voldemort could learn more about you."

Harry bristled, but he could also begin to see the correlations forming. "Keep talking."

Hermione eyed him cautiously, but continued. "We know that Voldemort caught on that you were using Legilimency against him, just like he was using it against you. After, what, five years of having a connection to you, he had to cut you off. But that was right when the entire Wizard world started screaming about you and the Prophecy--the worst possible time for him to lose his link to you. He's *afraid* of you, Harry. He wants to learn all about you, so he can prepare himself, predict your attack, make himself feel safer."

Ron made an appalled face. "Since when do you know all about how Vol-Voldemort feels?" Harry beamed at him proudly; they were getting better about the name, no doubt about it.

Hermione peered down her nose. "He's just a man, Ron. The sooner you start thinking of him as having the same frailties as the rest of us, the better."

Ron grimaced skeptically. "Hermione, sometimes you really creep me out."

She sniffed and turned back to Harry. "Anyway, I was *saying*: he can't sneak up and study you anymore. He needs spies, or other people who know you. Where's he going to look for people like that? He can't get to anyone in the Order, at least not easily. He can't get to the staff at Hogwarts. How many other people know you, Harry? He could have come after me, or Ron, or Neville, I suppose, but we're just kids, right? He wouldn't trust us to understand you and your motives like an adult would."

"He could ask HIM," said Harry in a malevolent tone. Ron and Hermione knew exactly who he meant.

"Maybe, certainly he could *now*, but a year ago, who knows? But it's not as though you ever told Sn-HIM anything personal, you hated each other! Voldemort needed an adult that you *liked*, maybe even trusted, someone who could give him solid, objective facts about how you think, how you solve problems. Sn--HE knows a little about where you're weak or vulnerable, but he can only guess at how you're strong! But Fortescue, there's a fellow who sat around and shot the breeze with you while plying you with ice cream, every day for two weeks."

"But all we were talking about was History of Magic, Hermione!" Harry said it almost pleadingly. He didn't want Fortescue to be captured and tortured on his account. How empty did his world have to be, in order to keep people safe from Voldemort? Harry was incredibly glad that Uther had gone off to set the Gamidges straight.

"History is essentially the study of war and tactics, Harry--exactly the kind of thing Voldemort would want to know about you! Besides, he wouldn't know what you'd talked about until *after* he'd captured Fortescue!"

"Or Fortescue went to him," said Ron vehemently. "You're both assuming the bloke is an innocent victim here, and you don't *know* that. He could have handed over what he knew about Harry *willingly*! The fact that he's still alive might even have something to do with that, eh?"

Hermione looked a bit subdued. Harry nodded, not looking at either of them, then spoke. "You're right. We don't know how Fortescue got in this situation, only that *right now*, he's been out gathering information about my parents. Their friends, actually. Which means Voldemort expected me to come here, and wanted to know where I'd be going, who I'd be talking to. He probably tried to blow up the inn to make sure I'd have nowhere safe to stay when I came." He sighed. "I imagine Fortescue knew I was curious about my parents; it probably came up at some point in the conversation." Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance; neither had the heart to tell him that this was as plain as the scar on his forehead.

Calliope skipped into the pub at that point, gave them all an utterly flustered look, then dashed back through the rear door. "I think she forgot the milk," said Ron.

At Lachesis's urging, Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent the night in the Green Dragon. Harry no longer desired to put anyone else in the Hollow at risk by inquiring about his parents. Lachesis had recommended they visit the muggle library, however; they could at least look at newspaper articles from that time.

After a breakfast of cold bacon and bread, they set out for the library, which was essentially the basement of a large manor house that served as Town Hall, courthouse, jail, and community center. Although Harry was curious about newspaper clippings, he went cold at the thought of peering at reels of microfilm, not knowing when he might suddenly land on a photo of his former home. Hermione offered to go through the films first, and Harry gladly accepted.

Wandering through the library, he noticed a peculiar tingling in his palms and the soles of his feet as he passed the shelf in the furthest corner of the room. It happened more than once, and he motioned Ron over to his side. "You feel that?" he asked.

Ron looked puzzled. "Feel what?"

"Walk this way, behind this last row." Harry steered him around the to the far side of the shelf. Ron's shudder as he stepped past the bookcase told Harry all he needed to know. They exchanged a pointed look and began carefully scrutinizing the shelves and their contents; there was something magical there, though neither of them had ever encountered anything quite like it before.

When a meticulous search turned up nothing, Harry tossed his head casually toward the librarian, who, like Madam Pince, apparently considered the reading or handling of books an act of sacrilege. Ron immediately sauntered to a shelf on the other side of the room and began pulling books down, holding them open in mid-air with one hand and flipping pages with a rough snap. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched the librarian eyeing Ron in agony; she was unwilling to leave her desk, however, which had an optimized viewpoint of all the shelves. When Ron began to mutter "Oho!" and fingered the corners of the pages as if to dog-ear them, however, her resolve broke and she bustled across the room.

Harry quickly yanked his wand out of the back of his shirt (he'd tucked the handle into his belt and let it rest against his spine, since there was nowhere in these summery Muggle clothes to comfortably conceal an eleven-inch wand) and muttered every revealing spell he could think of as he waved it at the shelf. Nothing happened. He tried spells both to open doors and unlock them, with no results. Ron was going to be thrown out of the library any second now, and Harry knew he would undoubtedly be deemed guilty by association by the librarian. For lack of a better idea, he whispered, halfheartedly, the incantation to open the Marauder's Map: "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Those could not have possibly been the correct words, but perhaps all that mattered was the intent behind them, for at that moment a beautiful red book appeared on the shelf. Harry snatched it up, stuffing his wand down the leg of his jeans and giving the book the place of honor in the back of the waistband. He hoped the Muggle T-shirt was thick enough to obscure it. "I'm so sorry," he called to the matron, who was attempting to delicately but firmly remove a copy of Dante's *Inferno* from Ron's grasp. "Please excuse my brother! He has a rare form of epilepsy, he doesn't even know what he's doing when he's like this. Come on, Ronnie," he urged, handing Ron's book to the librarian and guiding him to the door, keeping his back toward the opposite wall as she watched them exit, seething.

When Hermione emerged half an hour later, she shoved a handful of copied microfilms into Harry's hand and proceeded to cloud up and rain all over them. "She almost threw me out too, you know! I had to lie and tell her I'd never seen you two before, but we'd ridden the same bus here and you'd been acting funny the whole way. What's the *matter* with you idiots?"

Harry and Ron were honestly trying to acknowledge, fairly, that they'd embarrassed her, but they were both so impressed by her off-the-cuff explanation that their faux humility fell apart. Ron actually scooped her into his arms and swung her around in an arc, laughing.

Harry beckoned her to sit beside him on a concrete bench in the square, where he could conceal the book in his lap as he showed it to her. He explained how he'd found it, but realized that she wasn't paying any attention; she was turning the pages reverently. She was so completely engrossed in the writing that she didn't even notice when Harry stopped speaking in mid-sentence. It dawned on Harry that magical books were not always benign, and he waved his hand a bit frantically in front of her eyes. She looked up at him with a rapturous expression.

"Harry... you know I've taken Ancient Runes," she began.



"Yes..." said Harry, twirling his hand in the air to encourage her to continue.

"I've only seen writing like this in the advanced textbooks Professor Rumil let me borrow," she said in an awestruck voice. "These were the 'ancient runes' that people studied, back when what we call ancient runes were the common tongue! And these--" she gently turned back to a page written in a different script, which was indented like a poem, "--I think this might be the Primary Tongue of the Eldest. Harry! Ron!" She stared elatedly at each of them in turn. "This is the language of the first Wizards on Earth!"

## 6: The Phoenix Tale

*Chapter 6 of 50*

A historical chapter about Fawkes's role in two significant events. Here's a bit of fun: I read parts of this chapter for the Phoenix Rising Shrimpcast #4, which can hopefully be found [here](#).

Adric Gryffindor turned his collar up against the wind as he trudged across the moor. It was a particularly cold, wet day for a journey, especially for such an old man, but his excitement was too great to contain. He had to reach his brother's house. He could see the windows glowing across the vale. As a boy, he could run from the manor to the outbuildings in a matter of minutes, but now his shuffling gait would drag this trip out for more than an hour.

An hour was nothing compared to a lifetime of study, particularly a Wizard lifetime. Adric was a scholar of Ancient Runes, and he had spent the better part of a century translating a single text. Like water wearing down stone, he had labored years without noticeable progress; it took a year to sort out the alphabets, and that was after a year ascertaining there were four languages represented in the text. The main tongue, fortunately, had been the precursor to a well-studied ancient language, which had evolved into their current tongue. It was possible to draw general conclusions about the content and even the sound of the text after a mere decade of study. He'd spent twice as many years collecting more grammar: rubbing charcoal reliefs from carved stones, scouring catacombs for scraps of parchment, visiting royal and noble families to copy the runes etched on weapons so ancient they ought to have crumbled to dust--but the magic they possessed had kept them intact, which was of course precisely why they were invaluable.

The text had been written in three distinct hands, one spidery and fine, one firm and flowing, one blocky and coarse. It was a record of events of its day, and also of history. It contained maps, songs, and many, many names, some of which shimmered tauntingly with magic inside his mind, if only he could pronounce them. All of these, however, were in a tongue so old that not a trace of it remained in any language; it would never be spoken aloud again.

He had found the book in his youth, during a holiday far down in the southwest. He and his brother had spotted a pleasant-looking hill while riding brooms, and stopped to enjoy the view over lunch. He approached what he took for an ancient well made of brick, finding to his great surprise that his voice did not echo sharply from water within, but reverberated strangely. Guessing that there was some sort of chamber in the hill beneath them, the two brothers naturally (and promptly) opened the hillside with their wands. There was indeed a cavity, burrowing and branching deep into the hillside. Ancient tiles, though displaced by roots, still demarked a hallway, and some semblance of walls and archways were still discernable, though the entire hilltop had obviously sunk; the ceiling was too low for them to stand upright anywhere inside.

All within was long decayed, but Adric happened to spot a pane of glass reflecting the dim light of his wand. He fancied to let some sunlight through the tiny window one more time. Levitating the dirt on the other side of the glass, he stepped forward to admire the view that the previous occupants had doubtless enjoyed. The hem of his robes brushed the dirt from the surface of a book, revealing the red cover in the sunlight. It was perfectly intact, as though fresh from a book-binder, yet Adric knew at once that the writing was older than any runes he'd ever seen.

They should have taken it to Camelot for study, but Adric knew he was meant to have it. The world was not so capricious as to lead a budding Runemaster and his undaunted, curious little brother to *this* particular hill on a dry, sunny day, without a reason. Thus began a lifetime of meticulous study, which he felt had come to fruition this very afternoon.

Adric pounded on the door once, then barged in straightaway as usual. Helga Hufflepuff was visiting, which was just as well; this concerned her too.

"Godric, I found it!"

"Your blue cloak?" said Godric Gryffindor.

"No, you idiot, would I have walked all the way here on a day like this to tell you about my cloak?" he shouted. "And if I did, don't you suppose I would ~~wearing~~ it?" His brother was a great man, but at times he could be dumber than a bag of rocks. "I've found the Hidden City!"

Helga dropped the lamp she was holding, which immediately started a rather impressive fire as the oil splashed over the old floorboards. It was no match for their wands, however, and they quickly settled down at the hewn table. Adric's hands trembled under the best of circumstances, but now he was so excited that he could barely unroll his parchment.

"Here!" he pointed triumphantly.

Helga and Godric exchanged a skeptical look; Adric was pointing to an ancient map, which bore absolutely no resemblance to any land that they knew of. He glanced back and forth between them, clearly expecting a more enthusiastic response, then squawked in frustration. Yanking a modern map out of his bundle, Adric tapped it lightly with his wand, saying "*Hemilysis epistratum*," and laid it on top of the first parchment. The spell had made the parchment semitransparent, so the lower map was dimly readable through the top. He adjusted it carefully to his satisfaction, then beckoned them closer.

"Look at this range of mountains, it's on both maps," he said. "They've been there since the dawn of time, they've worn down quite a bit but you can still see the ridge on our map."

Godric raised his brow skeptically. "Adric, there are ridges like that all over the world. Nothing else on that map looks anything like our country!"

You know very well that the earth was violently changed, twice, since the first map was drawn. But *this* ridge, it's on every map, the same shape--" he fumbled quickly through his scrolls and unrolled a third map, "--you see how it appears here, the shape is even more similar. This map was made after the first Great Change." He pointed to the east of the ridge, at an area labeled in somewhat familiar letters. "These runes read very nearly like our own tongue--say it for yourself! '*Angband*.' It must be Angland, Godric. It *must*!"

"But the coasts... this isn't even an island, Adric!" Helga said.

"I know, but you aren't appreciating how much time elapses between these maps. The coasts and waterways change the most, erosion and what not. I believe, for example, that this whole basin--" he indicated a wide plain further east of the ridge--"widened and flooded, as this range of mountains drifted northeast to become the Nordic peninsula."

Helga's eyes lit up. "I remember from the story, there was a place at the edge of those mountains..." She scanned the map in Adric's hand closely. "Yes, this one. 'The Final Home...' If these mountains have indeed become Nordia, then 'Final Home' would be sitting right where Asgard is now!" She looked up meaningfully at Godric. The Odin Academy of Sorcery in Asgard was built on a site strong with ancient magic, and they dreamed of building their own school to rival it.

"Exactly!" said Adric gleefully. "Now, look again at the oldest map. Below the ridge was a kingdom of the Elders, the one where the entire forest was protected by magic. Imagine! Leagues and leagues in every direction, no one could enter without leave of the queen--what a witch she must have been!"

"Godric, if I'm correct, then the hill where we found the book, it was within the former bounds of the old forest kingdom. You know the story; that land was nearly hidden from men, protected, even though wars raged around it--though no one had woven spells over the area for thousands of years! And the original magic was strong enough to preserve the book all this time, without being maintained or replenished."

"The Hidden City dates even before the forest kingdom; it belonged to the Eldest. That was the story I deciphered last month. It fell because of treachery and betrayal, but it was never *found* by men. It would have even more potent magic than the forest kingdom, protective wards *and* hiding spells, crafted by the world's first wizards, Godric! It's here," he pointed, "in this circle of mountains. Those must have crumbled during the First Great Change, but the spot... look there, it must be right there. Only 70 leagues or so from here, two days by broom, at the very most!"

Adric looked up from the map with such wide-eyed enthusiasm, he seemed ready to start off right then. Helga pursed her lips and gave Godric a nod.

Godric and Helga headed north the next morning. Adric's tremors made his broom twitch too violently to fly. They followed the map, noting from the air that the roads built by both Romans and native clansmen all seemed to gently curve away from the spot they were heading. When the two friends suddenly eyed each other, each trying to judge if the other had sensed the tingle of power in the air, they knew it was time to descend. They set down on top of a cliff overlooking a lake, and neither needed to speak. They had found the site where they would build their school.

"I'll Apparate and get the others," said Helga, as Godric gazed in every direction, plans already forming in his head. Something was not quite right, though he couldn't place it until he turned around and found the crown of Helga's head poking out of the stony ground.

"Bugger!" He rushed over, but realized he was not quite sure what to do; he had gone on many bold adventures in his life, but none of them had involved solid rock acting like quicksand. He tentatively tried to pick up the bit of scalp. Perhaps she had merely splinched off the top of her head... but no, it was clearly attached to more of her, below the surface. "Helga?" he asked the scalp, which made no sound, but the hairline seemed to wriggle a bit. Cocking his head, he reflected that even if he had a shovel, it would be of little use on the granite. He finally decided to try "*Accio Helga!*", which, to his great relief, resulted in her emerging from the ground in a sort of rapid ooze.

"Well, I never!" she said, spitting out a pebble.

He flashed her a warm but slightly condescending smile; she could be so absent-minded at times, but that was part of her charm. "Don't worry, lass, I'll do it," he said, and Apparated, only to find himself in utter darkness, unable to move any part of his body, the taste of cold stone on his tongue and a terrible urge to visit the garderobe. He could still hear, oddly enough, Helga's muffled laughter.

After uprooting him, Helga nipped off on her broom for a few leagues to try again, leaving Godric finally alone to wander. The cliff was a perfect foundation for the castle. They would mine out some dungeons (Salazar would insist on tight, windowless places), and use the same stone to build the towers, though they'd have to import more, perhaps bricks as well. They would need slate for the roof. Perhaps they could find some stones from the original Hidden City. He wandered along the cliff's edge, lost in his own imagination, until something tugged at him from behind.

Godric was never one to jump when startled, so he turned around evenly to a most unexpected finding: an enormous red bird was standing on the hem of his cloak. "Well, hello there, beastie!" he said. "Seen a bit of trouble?" The bird looked ragged, with uneven clumps of feathers; its tail was starkly asymmetric, as though something had pulled out the long pinions on one side. Godric loved birds, and he'd never seen one so stately and beautiful, despite being disheveled. "Poor chap, you can't fly with half your tail gone, can you?" He patted down his robe for a biscuit he had stuffed in his pocket that morning, but the bird only gave it a polite nudge with its beak and sat back expectantly.

"You're no ordinary beastie, are you, friend?" said Godric respectfully, recognizing the sentience behind its behavior. "It must have been some battle for your pinions, what? Well, you're safe with me, now." He tucked the bird snugly in the roomy hood of his cloak, whereupon it trilled softly, laid its scarlet head on his shoulder, and exploded into flames.

Rowena Ravenclaw had already arrived (her home was actually not very far away) and was approaching the cliff on foot when she suddenly saw Godric flare up. Scrambling through the scree up the hillside with her wand ready, she arrived to find him sitting in a pile of ashes, naked as the day he was born, reverently cradling something tiny in his palm. She had already begun to put pieces together; ignoring his state of undress, she ran to his side and peered into his cupped hand. Sure enough, there was a damp, new chick resting there.

She stared at the phoenix with awe, until she remembered the lore of the Bonding. "Godric! Can you speak?" she said, shaking his shoulders in alarm. "Are you still yourself, my friend?"

Godric took his wide eyes off the hatchling at last and gazed at her in pure joy. *He'll be all right*, she thought with relief, and began bundling the two of them in her own cloak. *Pity he wasn't wearing that ugly hat when it happened.*

Tom Riddle had long since lost his patience as he stood in Ollivander's; the proprietor must be deliberately baiting him, recognizing his threadbare Muggle clothes as the sign of a second-class customer. When the next wand sputtered weak yellow sparks, he threw it to the ground and grabbed the strange young man by the lapels, glaring at him fiercely. "Stop bringing out your shopworn garbage, you're not going to unload it on me!"

"Young sir, I assure you, all the wands in this shop are of highest quality." His unruffled complacency about being manhandled made Tom suppose that this infuriating trial-and-error approach was, in fact, something his customers endured regularly. He grudgingly released his hold.

"Don't you have any way of narrowing down the selection?" Tom finally said in exasperation.

Ollivander studied him carefully a moment. "Perhaps. There is something about you, Master Riddle, that makes me wonder... I have a special collection, one which I rarely show." He rolled his ladder to the back of the shop and climbed to the top, retrieving several very dusty boxes, so old and dry they looked ready to crumble. Tom could already feel something about these wands; they had gone unsold for so very long not because they were second-rate merchandise, but because there were very few customers who could handle them.

"These were constructed by my great-great-great-grandfather," said Ollivander. "We sell only a handful of his creations in a century. His, erm, technique was unlike any other wandmaker in my family, though of course his instruments are of the same precision and quality as any Ollivander wand." He arranged the boxes in a neat stack on the floor, and set about to gently loosen the ancient lids.

"As you may know," he continued, "each wand has a magical object concealed in its core. Such objects are generally found, harvested, bartered for, et cetera, in other words, obtained by what one might call 'fair' means. This collection, however, is unique in that their materials were acquired under, erm, less equitable circumstances."

"These three, for example," said Ollivander, "contain dragon heartstrings which were cut out while the heart was still beating." Tom listened raptly; the shopkeeper had his full attention now. "The wood of this one came from an olive tree in Tuscany, over 2000 years old. It was cut down by an arrogant patrician to be whittled into buttons for

his shirts. He promptly choked to death on one of them." He handed it obligingly to Tom, who admired it, but though it felt more suitable by far than any other, it was still not quite right.

"What else?" said Tom, replacing the wand in its box respectfully (for a change).

"Ah, this one... this one," said Ollivander, peering reverently at the one he'd just opened. "I think this may suit you, young sir. The core is a tail feather of a phoenix--stolen from the creature at the height of its strength. A feat that has never been duplicated. All other phoenix wands are made from feathers given willingly, or discarded, or, rarely, quickly plucked just before the withered creature immolates itself. This one came into my ancestor's possession for a considerable price. We do not know who...obtained it from the phoenix, or how the feat was managed...only that it was obtained in the manner I described."

Tom took the wand reverently. It fit his palm with a cool balance, and as he ran a loving finger along the length of the wood, it felt like part of his arm.

Ollivander smiled at him obsequiously. Tom Riddle never felt any sense of gratitude or debt, particularly when he was forced to pay a fair price for something he wanted. But he knew he must reward the shopkeeper some day for this service.

As the unpleasant youth finally left his shop (his bag of gold considerably lighter), Ollivander shuddered and replaced the wands on their remote shelf. Since he was a child, he hated even to touch their boxes, but they were beautiful in their own dark way--and every one he sold meant that fewer remained to spread their gloom in the shop.

While climbing down from the ladder, however, he nearly lost his footing in surprise. A beautiful scarlet phoenix was perched on the back of the spindly chair. With a little trill, it stretched its neck and wrenched hard at a tail feather, which pulled out a plug of flesh when it finally came free. Ollivander approached it slowly and took the feather from its beak; the red and gold striations on the underside were identical to those inside the wand he'd just sold.

The phoenix gave him a hard look. Ollivander nodded; he had some holly in the basement, and would turn it on the lathe that night. The feather would be made into a wand within a fortnight.

The phoenix gave him a satisfied nod, and disappeared with a flash.

## 7: For Better

*Chapter 7 of 50*

The long awaited wedding of Bill and Fleur. Harry learns there was more to his invitation than he initially thought. Fred and George get the best lines, as usual. Harry's Patronus, the Stag, is a hit at the reception.



Harry, Ron, and Hermione had seen enough of Godric's Hollow. Between the knowledge that Voldemort had sent spies in anticipation of Harry's visit, and the fact that they had just come into the possession of an incredibly valuable ancient relic, they all felt the need to move on. Fortunately, the Burrow was close enough to Apparate there safely. Together they clutched their brooms tightly and willed themselves through the sensation of being pulled through a Chinese finger-cuff. The only complication was that Harry ended up perched on the roof of the Weasley's garden shed; a butterfly had drifted past his nose just as he was beginning the spell, causing his concentration to waver ever so slightly.

Despite the fact that the house and garden were teeming with people, no one noticed this *faux pas*, or indeed, that the three of them had even arrived. All three of their jaws went slack as they beheld the frantic bustling in every direction. A table of girls around Ginny's age were wrapping up rose petals in circles of ivory tulle and tying them with ribbons. A delivery witch was unloading small, exquisite boxes of sweets from the saddlebags of a winged horse onto floating silver trays, stopping frequently to rearrange the boxes until more would fit while still looking uncluttered. Steps away, a filthy chimney sweep was watching the process hungrily, but the pegasus clearly had his number and was not about to permit any soot near the burden it had borne so carefully. People were trotting in and out of the house and garden with gifts, papers, clothes hanging in fancy bags, flowers, and foodstuffs of all sorts.

Ron and Harry stared in disbelief at the whole process, even as Hermione's face lit up with excitement. She squeezed both of them on the arms with a delighted squeal and tried to pull them into the fray, but they hung back stubbornly. "Come on, you lumps, they need all the help they can get!" she chided, and set off at once to find an assignment for herself.

"Harry?" said Ron, slackjawed, "I'm never getting married."

A joyous shriek from inside the Burrow indicated that Hermione had found Mrs. Weasley. Harry punched Ron's shoulder to break him from his bewildered trance, and the two of them resigned themselves to two days of indentured servitude.

Harry left the Burrow near midnight, stepping through emerald flames into the blissful peace and quiet of Grimmauld Place. The Burrow was too full for company; Charlie, Fred, and George had all been called home to help prepare for the wedding feast. After seeing the kind of detail and bother the Weasleys were sorting through, Harry shuddered to imagine Fleur's home, where the wedding itself would take place.

The house was dark and quiet, but Harry could see light coming from the drawing room as he headed up the stairs. Though tired, he knocked anyway out of curiosity. "Come!" said the voice of Mad-Eye Moody. He was hunched over the rolltop desk from which Mrs. Weasley had once, with considerable difficulty, banished a boggart.

"Evening, Harry," he said, without lifting his head from his papers; his magical eye had spotted Harry through the back of his head.

"Good evening," said Harry. "I won't interrupt, I was just on my way to bed."

Moody turned in his chair, tearing off a section of the parchment he was studying and crumpling up the remainder. "No bother. Sit a minute." Harry did as he was asked, wondering what the old man had in mind. Apparently Moody wasn't quite sure himself, as he shifted in his seat several times, fiddling with the parchment distractedly.

"That was good field work, Potter," he finally said.

Harry, who had grown more and more convinced that he was about to be chastised for something, sighed audibly with relief and said, "Thanks."

Moody leaned forward. "I mean it. All three of you. You've got good instincts, think fast on your feet. I'd like to see you all in MLE."

"Emily?" said Harry, puzzled.

"M-L-E. Magical Law Enforcement. Aurors, in other words." Patches of pink were appearing between the reticulated scars on Moody's face. Harry couldn't believe it; the old man was actually blushing.

"You know, Crouch told me the same thing in my fourth year--when he was disguised as you." Harry began to blush a bit himself.

Moody folded his arms. "He did, eh? Must'a got some of my good *sense* with the looks, then, the prat." Moody smirked and turned back to the desk. "Get on to bed, lad."

"Professor?" Harry said on a nervous impulse.

"Moody'll do," he said, though he didn't turn back around.

Harry's voice was a strained whisper. "Do you think I can beat him?"

Moody took a deep breath, resting his elbows on the desk and rubbing his neck. "He's a mean one, Potter. I think it'll take everything you have. Maybe even your life." He turned to face Harry again. "But he's also a bitter old man, scratchin' and clawin' to stay alive though he don't know a thing about living.

"You sussed out little Calliope just right, helping her do that spell. And that banshee in the library; I don't know what you were up to, but it was a fine diversion, even if I had to watch it through the lass's midriff. Half of every battle's won in the *mind*, Potter--by understanding your opponent. You've got a grasp of hatred and despair, but he's got no concept of courage nor love. He won't know what hit him when you play those cards."

Nodding, Harry just said, "Good night."

Harry's first thought as he was awakened the next morning was that a huge bumblebee was mistaking his face for a flower. Half asleep, he swatted at it irritably, which resulted in a series of indignant screeches; this un-beelike behavior woke him with a snap. It was Pigwidgeon, flapping around in his typical frenzy. Harry bemusedly pulled the tiny scroll from the owl's leg; it bore only the words, "GET BACK HERE!" in Ron's handwriting.

For the next six hours, Harry became an errand boy for the entire Weasley clan. He made two separate trips to the Ministry of Magic, one to retrieve the permit for a Portkey from Ottery St. Catchpole to Dijon, France (which Arthur had forgotten to pick up), and another to file some sort of registration for Fleur Delacour to become a citizen of the UK after the wedding (which had slipped out of a stack of parchments that Bill had taken in). This was truly a measure of his love for the Weasley family, as he would prefer to step into a pile of dragon dung than the Ministry building. The second time, a photographer from the *Daily Prophet* had nearly managed to run him down, but he escaped through the Floo Network before she had time to get a snapshot of him in front of the bank of fireplaces. He suspected she might have caught him in the flames just before he whirled away, but he deliberately made a gesture that would make the photo unfit to print.

Hermione had been up nearly all night kneading dough. "They say it's bad luck to cook with magic for a wedding feast," she told Harry, handing him a large sack of potatoes and a peeler. "Sounds like a load of patriarchal rubbish to me, but what can you do, it's tradition. Everything's got to be prepared by hand--and Harry, you're the only one who has any idea how to use one of these. They were just going to mash them up with the skins on, but I couldn't bear to have lumpy potatoes at a big party like this!" She ran off to help decorate the long picnic tables in the yard, leaving Harry to mutter about how lumps weren't so bad as he wistfully recalled the labor-saving devices in his Aunt Petunia's kitchen.

When he'd scraped the last spud, Harry picked up the sack and hauled it into the house. It was worse in there than outside, since there were roughly the same number of people but only a fraction of the space. As is always the case in sculleries, there was a stream of sounds, smells, and activity that could hardly be called "steady," due to the chaotic starts and spurts that characterize the cooking process. One pot might be bubbling over as another was set on the burner for the first time, each cook grouching at the other for being in the way during "the one time" they needed the stove. Racks of rolls resembled a beehive, in that some were clearly in the larval state, having just been set out in a pinched spiral, while others were in varied levels of raising, still others emerging from the cocoon of the oven in their mature, edible form. Harry pocketed one of the latter, earning a light slap from an unknown witch, but this was nothing compared to his punishment for taking out his wand to conjure up a cauldron in which to boil his potatoes. Shrieks of "NO MAGIC!" came from every part of the room; he feared someone would snap his wand in half.

"Here, Harry, sweetheart, just give those to me," said an angel, which turned out to be Mrs. Weasley. She scooped up the bag of denuded potatoes and hustled them to the sink; a hapless witch drying her hands suddenly found her next chore thrust upon her. Mrs. Weasley returned to give him a quick hug, dodging a hot pie and grabbing a paper bag of pecans on her way. Harry took them obediently and made a hasty departure. When he realized he would have to go back in for a nutcracker, he sneaked behind the garden shed and conjured one, tradition or no.

Harry stretched that task out as long as he could, producing a fine collection of unbroken pecan halves, but finally had to face the reality of returning to the kitchen. The feasting hour was approaching, however, so the ovens were full but the kitchen nearly empty. He was able to make his way inside without danger of being minced and cooked into something. Mrs. Weasley was actually sitting down at the table, dashing off some last-minute orders to her sous-chefs before changing into her party dress. She looked up to see what Harry could possibly be doing in her kitchen, noticed the pecans, and waved him over.

"Oh, lovely, let's get these roasted and out on the tables, thank you, Harry--"

The ocean roiled below the white cliffs as Molly stood beside Arthur Weasley. They had just eloped. She was sure her parents would be upset; they had always wanted a fancy wedding for their little girl. Oh, they liked Arthur all right, even though he was actually a distant relation. All the pureblood families had that problem, but you couldn't hold it against people--you just had to go back through the family tree and make sure there were enough branches in there to hold up your descendants. But they wouldn't be pleased about the quick, secret wedding, nor the fact that Molly was married at barely eighteen years of age.

Well, that was just too bad. She loved Arthur. Mother kept saying she should wait, a better one might come along, but he was the one she wanted. And if a "better one" came along, well, there would be room in both their lives for new and treasured friends.

Bill was the first one. She thought she knew what love was all about, but nothing had prepared her for the fire this tiny bundle would light in her heart, not just a feeling, but a biologic imperative. She could spend all day nuzzling his fuzzy head, watching him stretch out his busy fingers and toes, laughing at the unselfconscious way he yawned or sneezed with his toothless little mouth.

She would rip out Fenrir Greyback's throat with her teeth if she ever caught sight of him.

Tonight would be Bill's wedding feast. Molly finally understood what Mother had meant about waiting, but even if Bill had waited forever, there would never be a woman "good enough" for her beloved baby. Fleur, at least, had proven herself to be a decent sort, but this was *her Bill*! Fleur couldn't possibly understand that he was so perfect,

so wonderful... until, perhaps, she bore Bill's children and discovered what love really meant herself.

Feeling almost as though he were fighting for breath, Harry pulled himself from the deluge of emotion and found his way back to his own eyes, his own mind. He knew he could not touch a flame like that in her heart and remain unchanged; it would burn in him forever.

Mrs. Weasley didn't look too happy, though. As that peculiar calm descended upon Harry, he wondered if she would strike him, but he wouldn't really mind if she whapped him with a frying pan. It would all heal, and it was a price worth paying for the privilege of finding her mind. "I'm sorry, Molly," he said. "I can't stop myself from doing that."

She nodded, avoiding his eyes. "Well," she said in a courageously and artificially lighthearted voice, "I think I'd better head upstairs, get changed..."

Harry caught her in his arms as she stood up. "Thank you," he said earnestly.

"For what, dear?" she asked.

"I went to Godric's Hollow to find out why my parents died. But you showed me instead."

Thus were the floodgates finally opened on a tearful (but joyous) weekend.

Harry spent the first few hours of the feast in Ron's room, waiting for his disinterested calm to lift. By the time he finally trusted himself not to blurt out something spooky, most of the potatoes he'd peeled so diligently were gone, but there was still plenty of everything else. Harry was in the process of dispatching a plate of roasted pork when he spotted Ginny over by the hedge, chatting with other girls and eating the pretty sweets the pegasus had brought.

He nearly fumbled his plate right into his lap. He'd enjoyed going two whole days without suddenly plunging into a strange head, and if the past was any indication, he was likely to have a cluster of them before they'd go away. Harry wasn't so sure he *wanted* to be privy to Ginny's heart of hearts at the moment. She sure looked pretty, though, he mused, hunching over his supper in hopes that she wouldn't see him.

Around that same time, Harry began to notice a certain unexpected quiet on the other side of the house. It crept into his awareness in a slow, nefarious way, such that when he finally realized what was bothering him, he leapt up in terror. There weren't many things that could quiet down a raucous party such as this, but dementors leapt to his mind as an obvious possibility. Harry nearly tipped the bench over in his haste to get to the front yard, wand in hand and ready to summon a whopper of a Patronus.

As he skidded around the house, though, Harry felt none of the cold dread that accompanied a dementor attack. He felt a little disoriented, because he couldn't see anything obviously amiss; there were no screams, no one was running. In fact, a number of people appeared to be making a point of focusing on their supper. For a brief moment, Harry wondered if he'd lost his hearing, but suddenly everything made sense: Percy Weasley was standing on the front walk.

Harry's sprint through the yard had led several others to follow in concern, which of course produced a multiplying effect. Within minutes, the entire wedding party had accreted into a wide semicircle around Percy. To his credit, although he had surely hoped for a less conspicuous entrance, Percy stood his ground, biting his lip nervously with his head inclined.

Arthur began to approach his son, but Bill put a hand on his father's shoulder. Bill crossed the gap between Percy and everyone else, stopping directly in front of him. Percy looked up, seeing for the first time how fearsomely his brother had been mauled by the werewolf Fenrir. "Morgana, Mordred, and Merlin!" he said faintly, raising a faltering hand to Bill's jaw.

"Still better looking than you, you know," said Bill.

Percy regarded him a moment longer, his eyes growing wider and wider until, without any transition, they overflowed with tears. Bill immediately scooped his brother up into a stalwart hug. If the Weasleys had ever hoped for a lawn sprinkler in their yard, the weeping engendered by this simple act was closest they'd ever get.

Harry felt like he'd just closed his eyes when the pounding started on his door. It was Tonks, as usual; no one took more joy from thrashing a door than she did, especially, it seemed, if someone was desperately trying to snooze behind it. When he saw how high the sun had already climbed, however, he was glad she'd come by; he'd nearly overslept.

His new clothes had been pressed and hung up by the bed. He shook his head; it seemed sometimes that there must be another house-elf hidden in Grimmauld Place. The linen shirt was clean and crisp, and the silk robes felt even lighter and cooler than the first time he wore them. As he appraised himself in the mirror, he nodded at his reflection and murmured, "Sharp!" He didn't care what Phineas Nigellus might have to say about it.

He headed for the kitchen for a quick hop through the fireplace back to the Burrow; after going to the Ministry to get that bloody Portkey, he was darn well going to take it to France. Remus was coming upstairs, and gave Harry a winning smile with a thumbs-up, but with a jerk of his head toward Lady Black's portrait--apparently she was in a particularly foul mood--indicated that he'd better tiptoe the rest of the way.

Harry had just buttered a quick slice of bread for the road when the portrait went off, followed seconds later by the appearance of Tonks, who bellowed, "Oh, go get retouched!" back up the stairs. As she spotted Harry, her frown became a wide smile and she looked him over in such a thorough and deliberate manner, he started to blush. "You look *good*, baby," she said, her voice deep and sincere.

Harry was suddenly reminded of that dream of Lupin's, in which Tonks was calling for him in her despair. "Stop it," said Harry, much harsher and colder than he intended. She stopped short and leaned away from him, taken quite off guard by his reaction. She opened her mouth to speak but apparently couldn't come up with an adequate response. As she stood there staring and blinking at him, Harry felt like a complete git. She didn't know anything about the dream, after all...

... she felt like a mouse that had blundered into a trap; coming forward to admire a lovely piece of cheese, she found herself under attack, struck painfully and unexpectedly. She might as well be at work, where she *had* to keep her guard up all the time. Number twelve was the one place in the world that she could feel safe and free; she'd held Remus and wept for joy when he told her Harry had given it to them...

... "OUT!" she said, and they were both back in the kitchen.

Harry knew he'd barely touched her mind, and the strange calm barely flickered at his awareness. He sighed heavily; he was getting tired of mumbling the same tired apology over and over. He shook his head pleadingly at Tonks.

She threw him a penetrating glare, folding her arms, then sniffed reprovingly. "Moody warned me you were quick," she said with a hint of controlled anger. "What's your problem?"

He bowed his head. "Heck if I know," he said plaintively. "I'm sorry. I've said that so many times this week, it's starting to feel like a lie." He looked up at her. "I *am* sorry I snapped at you, though, I mean that. It's just..."

"What?"

Harry sighed again. "You know Remus. He's so scared that you're going to find some young *stud* that'll, you know, edge him right out of the picture."

To Harry's immense relief, her eyes widened and lit up mirthfully. "That's why you barked at me?" He nodded. Her grin returned, as impish as ever. "And are *you* afraid I'll be sneaking into your room one of these nights, *bay-bee*?" She emphasized the last word with a snide drawl.

Harry snorted, but averted his eyes sheepishly. "Terrified. No, seriously," he paused, "it just hit me the wrong way. I don't ever want him to feel like... I'm a threat."

The tension finally dissipated. "Harry," she said gently, "I can't stop him from fretting. Believe me, I've tried; he might even be more mule-headed than me on that score. But I'll tell you what," mischief creeping into her voice again, "I'm *in love*, not *dead*. I have to have a flirt with a tasty little dish now and then, it's one of those laws of nature." She winked.

Harry nodded with exaggerated solemnity. "Far be it from me to oppose the law."

Harry stepped out of the fireplace in the Burrow with a bit of a spring in his step, which was promptly quashed by Fred and George, who, despite their exquisitely tailored formal robes, pounced on him with the energy of a pair of rabid Irish setters. "Heavens above, mate, you've got everyone in a panic, where've you been?" roared one of them, but before Harry could even answer, he felt himself being pulled through a dark tunnel, to land somewhat painfully on Stoatshead Hill. The twins were in such a hurry they had Disapparated two feet above the ground. Harry didn't even have time to gain his footing before an old boot was thrust into his hands and the three of them were whisked off by a sharp tug in the stomach, arriving in what seemed to be a dark, empty hayloft.

"Welcome to France, Mr. Potter," said Fred. "Now move it!"

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Harry grumpily, though he scurried down the ladder out of the loft.

There were still a few people milling about in the barn, adjusting their ties or hats, dusting off bits of straw, or simply sneezing and dabbing their runny eyes and noses with a kerchief. Harry wondered briefly about the wisdom of assigning the Portkey to a dusty old barn on such an occasion, but he had no time to mull it over; Fred and George were already hauling him out the door.

"What's the rush? I'm just on time--" Harry began, but both twins hissed at him.

"Harry, you're the Sealer. You should've been here an hour ago!" said Fred.

"At *least* an hour! We've been stuck out here with two families' worth of uptight lunatics since sunrise," said George.

Fred looked as though he had another comment to make, but Harry had to cut him off. "Hold on, what do you mean? I'm the what?"

Fred actually stopped in mid stride. "The Sealer! Didn't you read your invitation?"

Harry just stared at him, dumbstruck. Fred might as well have been speaking Greek. The twins regarded one another, and both slapped their foreheads with a groan.

"Mother of Merlin, now what?" said George.

"We *can't* let Mum see him like this, it'll be pandemonium," said Fred.

"Will one of you please make SENSE!" demanded Harry, as they immediately steered him behind someone's garden wall.

"Listen, mate, I can't believe you didn't know this," began George. "You're part of the ceremony. Mum will spontaneously combust if she finds out you're not prepared, so..."

"Prepare to get prepared," finished Fred.

Harry groaned. "You've got to be kidding," he said weakly.

"It's not so bad," said George. "All you do is... what exactly *does* the Sealer do, Fred?"

"Oh for pity's sake, brother, you ought to pay attention now and again. Here's the thing: it's the custom for the most powerful wizard at the wedding to seal the bond. Guess what, chum? That's you." Harry screwed up his face in disbelief and protest, but Fred was unmoved. "No arguing, Chosen Boy, you're it. All you have to do is go to the front after the handfasting and make a little speech. Sort of giving your blessing to the couple. It's not so bad."

Disbelief gave way to outright scorn. "Not so bad?! After the what? What am I supposed to say?" Harry was beyond butterflies in his stomach; it felt more like a flock of hummingbirds on a rampage.

George piped up, thoughtfully, "Something along the lines of 'may your house be prosperous and your children quiet and obedient,' that sort of thing."

Harry scoffed impatiently. "Come on, you two, I've never been to a wedding, you've got to be more help than that!"

"No time!" said Fred, with a sincerely anxious look. "Harry, it's starting in ten minutes, we're already in trouble, we've got to get down there and hand out flowers or something."

"Usher," mused George.

"Just get in there and sit with Hermione, she'll come up with something in ten minutes. Whatever she says, cut it in about half and there's your speech." With that, both of them dashed off, leaving Harry muttering at the roses, which probably would have wilted had they spoken English.

He straightened his shirt and scampered after them. Fortunately, it was quite obvious where to go; the cobbled lane led to a paved street, upon which a crowd of well-dressed people were all heading in one direction. Harry dashed up the lane quickly, then slipped through the crowd as quickly as he could without shoving. They were heading toward a grassy open square with a fountain in the center. Chairs had been set out in three large groups separated by aisles; many of them still remained empty, and several red heads were bobbing amongst them, escorting guests to their seats. Harry spotted Ron in the left-hand section with a pair of stunning women, one on each arm; undoubtedly they were some of Fleur's half-veela aunts, as all the men's heads followed them like compass needles.

"Harry!" Arthur Weasley's hand was suddenly on his arm, steering him off to the side. "You're here! We were beginning to wonder if there was trouble." His voice was calm, but there was a hint of edginess; he looked as though he'd be glad to get this whole thing over with.

Harry smiled with all the warmth he could muster. "No trouble, I just got the time wrong, so sorry I worried you." Ugh. Well, he'd made up one speech, and it seemed to comfort Mr. Weasley; he only had one more to go.

Mr. Weasley steered him to a chair in the center section, in the front row. "You're sitting with the Guests of Both, Harry, since you're the Sealer. We'll talk to you after the ceremony." He rushed off before the blood drained from Harry's face; Hermione was sitting primly in the section to his right, already sniffing happily into her hanky. Harry sunk into his chair and wished the ground would just reach up and pull him under.

He *did*, at least, have a few minutes to think. Harry pondered over books he'd read, things he'd seen on the Dursleys' television, trying to come up with something either elegant or romantic (preferably both). Nothing was leaping out at him. He shook his head--all he could think of was that idiot George and his remark about "may you have obedient children." May your sons be nothing like their uncles Fred and George, he mused. Well, maybe the ceremony itself would give him some ideas; his speech might be a bit repetitive, but he could hardly go wrong by lifting phrases that someone else had already approved.

The square was getting full. Harry decided that the section to the left must be the Guests of the Bride; there were, among others, many stunning women with long, silver-blond hair, a number of ladies he recognized from the Beauxbatons contingent of the Triwizard Tournament (as well as Viktor Krum), and a few familiar faces from Hogwarts. To his right were several members of the Order, a number of men and women around Bill's age, and, to Harry's delight, in the far back corner sat Hagrid. Harry gave him an enthusiastic wave, which Hagrid returned, smiling broadly.

As the last arrivals were being seated, and Harry was trying to dry the nervous sweat from his palms without marring his new robes, there were some "oohs" and "ahhs" among the guests. Harry saw people looking up at the sky and pointing, so naturally he did as well. To his amazement, a small fireball was burning itself out just over the square, and Fawkes was soaring down from it. Without so much as a flutter of his wings, he glided to the chair beside Harry and landed on the seat. He turned around in the chair and poked his tail feathers beneath the backrest; Harry nearly laughed despite himself, the phoenix looked so prim and proper sitting up straight in his seat. The guests were buzzing with excitement, and Harry figured this had to be some traditional omen of good luck. He whispered playfully to Fawkes, "I didn't even know you were invited!"

As a string quartet of witches behind the fountain began to play a hauntingly beautiful tune, the wedding guests stood as one and turned to the rear right. Bill Weasley, dressed all in black with an enormous pointed hat, began to walk up the aisle. Harry began to wish he'd brought his own kerchief, and not just for his damp palms; there was something deeply moving about the joyous smile on Bill's disfigured face. Harry hastily wiped a tear with the back of his hand.

Fawkes uttered a soft trill and tugged at Harry's robe with his beak. Without giving it a thought, Harry held out his arm to let Fawkes scramble up on his shoulder, but a moment later, he glanced over at the phoenix uncertainly, wondering how he'd known that Fawkes wanted him to do precisely that.

Bill, however, apparently knew the traditional routine. Instead of proceeding to the fountain as Harry had expected, he came up to Harry, doffed his hat, and made a deep bow. Harry had no idea if he should return it or not, but Bill must have guessed as much--he peeked up at Harry with a tiny shake of his head. Bill slowly stood upright again, and to Harry's surprise, Fawkes pulled his wings in tight and leaped over to Bill's shoulder. Everyone in the crowd gasped, and handkerchiefs dabbed at ladies' eyes across the board, as though a rabble of butterflies had launched from their laps. Good omen, indeed!

Now the crowd turned to the left, where Fleur was waiting at the end of her aisle. She, too, was dressed in black, with a red veil draped from the gold tiara that was a family treasure of the Weasleys. Harry had expected a white gown--he knew that much about Muggle weddings--but judging by the warm expressions on the guests' faces as the lovely bride passed each row, he guessed this must be another point where the customs varied.

Fleur, too, stopped before Harry and curtsied. Harry bowed in return and offered his hand to help raise her back up, then placed her hand in Bill's. Again, he had no earthly idea what had possessed him to do such a thing, but it seemed to be the proper response; Bill looked as though *he* was getting teary-eyed, and Fleur was positively aglow. Harry was glad she was wearing the veil; that smile could reduce him to a pulp.

The wedding party presently approached the fountain, Charlie Weasley and Gabrielle Delacour on the left aisle and (again, another tug at many heartstrings) Percy and Ginny Weasley on the right. The girls were scattering rose petals as they walked, which Harry thought were enchanted to enhance their smell (he found out much later that he was wrong, the beautiful scent that filled the square was produced solely by flowers, not magic). They came to a stop on either side of the bride and groom and offered them their hands. Bill and Fleur took hold, and their attendants lowered them slowly to their knees, facing each other. That was the cue for the Sealer to sit down and the audience to follow, but nothing tipped Harry off this time, until the white-bearded man beside him (undoubtedly one of Fleur's grandfathers, of the same vintage as Moody) cleared his throat and pointed discretely at the chairs. Harry sat, thankful that his back was to the audience; his cheeks turned as bright red as Fawkes.

A plump little witch that reminded Harry of Professor Sprout bustled merrily around the fountain and stood before Bill and Fleur. She smiled at each of them, then beamed cheerily at the guests, and began to speak.

In Latin.

Harry's heart plummeted. He knew Fred and George were sitting somewhere behind him, and though it wasn't necessarily their *fault* that he was in this predicament, he still wanted to wring their necks. He could think of nothing else but "may your children in no way resemble their uncles Fred and George" at this point. The quartet began to play again, and three young men came up from among the guests to sing, but Harry didn't bother getting his hopes up. They had come from the section on the left; sure enough, they sang something in French.

When they retreated to their seats (amidst frank weeping throughout the Bride's section--apparently whatever they'd sung had hit a tender spot), the stout witch faced Fleur and said, in English, "Do you come willingly, Fleur Delacour, to bind your life to this man?"

"I do." She held her right hand out before her, palm up.

The witch turned to Bill and asked, "Do you come willingly, Bill Weasley, to bind your life to this woman?"

"I do." Bill placed his right hand tenderly on her forearm, and both wrapped their fingers around the other's wrist.

"Come forth the Bonder to these supplicants, that they may make their vows," said the witch, and the old man beside Harry stood up and approached them solemnly. He, too, faced Fleur first, his ancient voice steady and dignified.

"Fleur Delacour, a child of mah blood, what vow do you ask of zees man?"

Fleur gazed lovingly at Bill and said, "Bill," she gulped with a tiny, charming giggle that melted every heart in the square, "will you share your life openly wiz me, and stand wiz me in all my challenges and successes, through all ze changes of our lives?"

Bill tightened his grip on her arm. "I will."

The Bonder raised his wand above their hands and wove it in a graceful figure of eight. A white rope appeared in the air, following the track of his wand. When he suddenly flicked up the tip, the rope fell partly onto their hands, partly *through* them, one loop remaining on Fleur's wrist, the other appearing under Bill's. A number of guests murmured in appreciation, and even Bill raised his brows in admiration; apparently, thought Harry, this was a top-notch marriage bond spell.

"Beel Weaslaiy, a man of great courage, what vow do you ask of zees woman?"

Bill pursed his lips for an instant and said, "Fleur, will you speak the truth to me with love always, and walk this world as my companion for all my days?"

"I will," she said, her voice quivering with tears.

Once again, the Bonder wove his wand in the air, circling in the opposite direction, and dropped this rope on and between their hands, this time landing on top of Bill's wrist and looping under Fleur's. He took a step backward and opened his arms toward both of them.

"Beel and Fleur, weel you vow to one anuzzair to live through zees life as 'usband an' wife, to be faiz-ful, to build an 'ome zat ees a place of love, joy, shareeng an' groweeng?"

"I will," they said in unison. He tapped the rope lightly with his wand, making it glow brilliantly. It appeared to constrict, but Harry soon realized that it wasn't tightening on their skin, it was sinking into their flesh, though without any sign of violence or pain. When the last of the rope disappeared, Bill and Fleur flung their hands in the air, releasing a white dove that spiralled up over them.

Bill leapt to his feet and scooped up his bride with a brilliant smile, spinning her around once before setting her back down. The Bonder spread his arms wide and embraced the two of them warmly, and Fleur kissed both his cheeks despite her veil. The guests clapped, cheered, and sniffled until the dove climbed out of sight in the bright sky.

Harry suddenly realized that his moment had come--that *had* to be the "handfasting" that Fred had mentioned. He was so caught up in watching it, he'd forgotten all about his speech. Sure enough, the matronly witch called out, "Come forth now the Sealer and set this Bond, that only death may rend it."

Harry couldn't even slouch, knowing that all eyes were upon him. He paced slowly across the ten feet of lawn that separated him from Bill and Fleur, eyeing the stout witch entreatingly, hoping against hope that she might have worked with previous Sealers that had stage fright or became tongue tied, and could bail him out of the worst of it. Her eye twinkled knowingly, and she ever-so-subtly guided him with a twirl of her finger to come around and stand next to her. She stepped back and smiled at him encouragingly. Harry turned miserably to face the entire congregation, deciding that even if he mucked it up horribly, at least the rest of the wedding was lovely; maybe they'd learn to laugh about it in a few years. Harry took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and caught Fawkes's eye.

Words began to pour from his mouth in a language he'd never heard, yet, as with Parseltongue, he somehow knew exactly what they meant.

*"And thus in anguish Beren paid*

*for that great doom upon him laid*

*the deathless love of Luthien,*

*to fair for love of mortal Men;*

*and in his doom was Luthien snared,*

*the deathless in his dying shared;*

*and Fate them forged a binding chain*

*of living love and mortal pain.*

*Too swift for thought his onset came,*

*too swift for any spell to tame;*

*and Beren desperate then aside*

*thrust Luthien and forth did stride*

*unarmed, defenceless to defend*

*Tinuviel until the end.*

*As gleam of swords in fire, there flashed*

*the fangs of Carcharoth that gashed.*

*That mattered not, for bonds there are*

*stronger than stone, or iron bar,*

*more strong than proudly spoken oath.*

*Have I not plighted thee my troth?*

*Hath love no pride or honour, then?*

*Or dost thou deem this Luthien*

*so frail of purpose, light of love?*

*By stars of Elbereth above!*

*Thou wilt not here my hand forsake*

*and leave me lonely paths to take."*

Harry stepped back, reeling. The words had come from Fawkes, he was sure of it, though he knew there was not even an inkling of language in Fawkes's mind. As he'd spoken them, they'd evoked the concepts of a forbidden love, a futile quest, a murderous wolf, and an ultimate sacrifice, not as images or memories, but as pure, overwhelming, sorrowful beauty. Apparently, they had done the same to everyone who heard them; everyone was misty eyed, and Harry could hear Hagrid's sobbing from clear at the other end of the park.

Tears even trickled out of Fawkes's burning eyes, and he tossed his scarlet head. The droplets arced off his feather, landing on Bill's face.

Though the existing scars did not change, the unhealed gashes that remained were closed into perfect, unmarred skin.

Fawkes threw Harry an almost guilty look, as though he were embarrassed to show off in front of so many people. He sang a single operatic note and took flight, snatching the red veil neatly from Fleur's head with his claws so it trailed behind him in the air. Harry watched Fawkes climb until he disappeared like the dove, which took considerably longer since he was so much larger and more colorful. But Harry couldn't bear to look down at Fleur, who was weeping and laughing at the same time at the sight of her Bill whole again.

"Excellent work. We never had a doubt, did we, Fred?"

Harry glared over his glasses at the two of them, stretched out in rattan chairs on the lawn of Beauxbatons with tall flutes of champagne and smug faces. They had been among the first to arrive at the reception and had parked in a prime location to observe the rest of the guests arrive, scouting out prospective partners for the evening's dancing. Harry supposed they'd be picking and choosing in no time, but every matronly aunt and grandmother thus far had come over to tell him what a lovely Sealer he'd been.

"Your confidence is underwhelming," Harry said sarcastically. "See if you can find a pretty one for me, while you're at it; I've got to lay low. If another dear old bird pinches my cheeks today, I may do something unspeakable."

"There's a nice little redhead in the Bride's party that might suit you," said Fred with a calculating look.

Harry's smile faded. "Yeah. You've got to be careful what you wish for, eh?"



George snatched another flute from a tray floating past, and handed it to Harry. "Don't worry, mate. She's all right. But I think even if You-Know-Who was watching, he'd scarcely notice one little dance..." Harry raised both his brows and his glass, clinked the latter to George's, and beat a hasty retreat into the stone walls and elaborate tiled roofs of Beauxbatons.

Two hours later, Harry was sitting up on one of those roofs, hiding under his Invisibility cloak and watching the proceedings disinterestedly. More than half the people chatting on the lawn below spoke a different language, and even though a translation spell was being circulated freely among the crowds, Harry didn't feel like making friendly chit-chat. He might as well hand people a flashing target to wear on their heads afterward, if Florean Fortescue were any example.

From the rooftop, he could spy Hagrid (although that could be said from virtually any place on the campus) speaking animatedly to Madame Maxime, undoubtedly about his trip overseas. Harry spotted several red Weasley heads bobbing among the crowds. He looked for a matched set and finally discovered Fred and George, each bearing a stunning Veela on both arms. He hoped Ron didn't have to go back to work at Wheezes; his brothers were bound to be insufferably smug after this. He found Hermione and Viktor Krum under a shady archway, standing far closer together than Ron would appreciate.

Harry wondered what Ron was up to, so he scanned for those distinctive red heads and identified each one he found. Fred and George were flirting ostentatiously; Bill was proudly attending his lovely bride; Percy, Charlie, and Ginny sat flanking them at the head table and looking politely bored as yet another guest came up to offer best wishes; Arthur and Molly were chatting with Fleur's parents, Molly also appeared politely bored, while Arthur twiddled his hat nervously and avoided looking directly at Madame Delacour.

Harry sat bolt upright with a rush of adrenaline--where was Ron? Now searching in earnest, he leapt to his feet on the steep roof, skidding down along a tile or two. There was no sign of him anywhere. He'd been thinking it was too quiet lately for a long time, that Voldemort was surely biding his time for a particular strike. What better day than this to undermine both Harry and the entire Weasley family? Harry clambered unsteadily back to the dormer window he'd used to gain access to the rooftop, not caring if his cloak flapped away to expose his legs.

He bolted through the sweltering classroom and down the stairs, only remembering to yank off his Invisibility cloak as he reached the bottom. He immediately started searching for any familiar faces. Spotting some friends of Bill's that he had met at the feast the night before, he charged over to them. "Have you seen Ron?" he asked urgently.

The fellows exchanged a knowing glance, and one said, "Hello, Potter! Yes, he's around, he's, ah..." He looked so awkward that Harry's terror quickly switched into concern. "Why don't I just take you to him, then?" the man finally said, and led him around to the edge of the campus.

Ron was sitting on the bare ground behind a stone shed amidst a number of empty champagne flutes (and a few green glass bottles as well). Neville Longbottom sat beside him, looking utterly out of his element, but Harry was incredibly glad to find him there. Harry nodded with silent gratitude at the man who had led him; the fellow clapped him on the back with a knowing grin and left to rejoin his friends.

"Harry!" said Neville, jumping to his feet with a broad smile, then casting his eyes sadly back at Ron.

"Hey, Neville," said Harry grimly, following his gaze. "Not the happiest of circumstances, eh?"

"Oh, Harry, you and that Bonder were the best I've ever seen, my gran's still crying. This wedding is going to be the talk of two countries for years. But," his voice dropped somberly, "yeah, Ron here..."

"What's gotten into him?" Harry couldn't help but refer to him in the third person; Ron was staring off into space, oblivious to the conversation.

Neville shrugged with a pleading look. "Bugger if I know. He was in a foul mood by the time we got to the wedding. I sat with him, even though I should have been in the Groom's section with Gran; he just looked like he needed company. Never said anything though." Ron raised the green bottle in his lap to drink, and Harry reached over to take it away, but Neville patted his arm. "It's okay, it's just water," he whispered. "Otherwise he'll just Summon a new bottle."

"Brilliant! Thanks, Neville. I'll keep an eye on him for a bit, okay?"

Neville looked as though he'd prefer to lurk behind the shed than return to the crowds, but he nodded gamely. "Sure thing. I'll stop by again in a while."

When Neville disappeared around the shed, Harry knelt down, cleared a space next to Ron, and sat beside him. For a long time, neither said anything. Ron took a pull at the bottle and grimaced. "Typical!" he said in a drunken bluster. "They put out good stuff, then soon as everyone's had a nip or two, it's cheap swill from then on. Hey, Harry!" Ron appeared genuinely surprised to see him. "Where'd Neville go?"

"Hey, Ron. Looks like you started without me."

Run giggled. "Hey, why not, you got more important things to do."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"Whaddya mean, 'what'? You know what. Your stuff that you do."

"You are really way too drunk."

Ron found that comment utterly hilarious. When he finally stopped laughing and removed his arms from Harry's shoulders, where they hung like dead weights, (particularly the one with the bottle of water), he sat back and sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I s'pose so, Harry. Seemed like a good idea at the time. Still does!" He took another long pull of water and offered Harry the bottle. Harry declined it with a wave.

"Have you seen Hermey?" Ron said, but did not wait for an answer. "She's off with *Viktor*. Creep. Walks in and sweeps her up, who knows if he'll be around tomorrow but hey, seize the day, huh?" He punched Harry's arm.

"Ron, what do you expect her to do?" Ron frowned, uncomprehending, and Harry rolled his eyes. "You're her friend. You've never led her to believe anything otherwise. *Anything*. How's she supposed to know how you feel? You get so mad at her, but you're expecting her to read your mind!"

Ron appeared to start processing that comment, but got distracted. He looked up suddenly and said, "That reminds me. About the mind reading. I'm reminded..." He burst into giggles and had to get them out of his system before continuing. "You read minds now. Tha's so cool. I wanna see."

"Maybe sometime, Ron." Harry didn't think a formal explanation would really sink in under the circumstances.

"No, come on! Mum said you did her! She started boo-hooing all over the place, my dad was jealous. Do me, Harry! I wanna see the legimi... leglima... aw, you know, that thing."

"It doesn't work like that, Ron," began Harry irritably, but before he finished the sentence, he gave Ron a hard glare and "that thing" did itself once again.

Harry kept a strong sense of himself as blurred images rolled over him; this was different from the times he'd been *inside* others' thoughts completely, as though immersed in a Pensieve. Ron's drunken thoughts were dilute, thin; Harry could see through them to the stone wall and the rest of the world.

A glimpse of Hermione running up to greet Viktor Krum, which seared through his insides as though he'd been impaled. Fred and George with their beautiful girls, offering to find him one or two if he wished. Harry watched himself beaming at Fawkes after he'd healed Bill's wounds. All of these led back the anchor in Ron's mind: the conflict of

joy and inadequacy. It infused everything, reaching out and entwining memories with delicate tendrils, or traversing gaps between unrelated subjects like a high-tension cable.

Not as smart as Bill or Charlie, not as outrageous as Fred or George, not as ambitious as Percy, not as popular as Ginny. Not a good Quidditch player, not a good student, not as confident, as daring, as brave. Such opinions were the core of his self-image for the first decade of his life, and then the whole cycle repeated when he left home to go to Hogwarts. The only difference was that, at home, he had six siblings to whom he compared himself, but at school, two people sufficed to make him feel just as mediocre.

Ron had worked all summer to earn his tuition to Hogwarts, and most of Ginny's, too. His parents wanted to throw a lavish feast for Bill's wedding; sparing them this expense was Ron's gift. Fat lot of good it was, chipping in so they could have pretty sweets at the feast, when Harry just came along with his overgrown budgie and gave Bill back his face...

Harry broke away effortlessly; he'd barely felt a real connection to Ron's addled psyche anyway. For once he was looking forward to that calm disinterest, but it didn't come. Ron wasn't cringing fearfully either; in fact, he was looking at Harry expectantly.

"Didja do it?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head, swallowing his resentment. "Nah. You're too drunk, like I said."

Ron slouched against the stone wall, disappointed. "Bugger."

"Yeah," Harry said, sitting back against the wall to stare off in the distance. As much as he would have liked to sulk angrily at Ron, he couldn't. All he could think about was the unconditional love in Molly Weasley's heart, wondering how something so immense, so palpable could go all these years unobserved by her sixth son.

Neville returned as the shadows began to stretch on the lawn. "They're starting supper, everyone's wondering where you two are..." They both looked at Ron, who was sound asleep, still clutching the water bottle.

"I'd better get out there, I guess," said Harry. He was sure his disappearance had already led to all sorts of conversations, but more importantly, he was starving. "Do you mind?" he asked politely, waving at Ron.

Neville looked relieved. "No problem! If we don't make it to the cake, will you bring me a piece?"

The first guest Harry encountered after he wended his way back to the party was Hermione. "Harry! Where've you been?! People were starting to really worry!"

"Erm, well, after that bit with Fawkes, my brain needed a little rest." She nodded sagely, apparently accepting that explanation.

"Oh, that was just wonderful, Harry, did you plan that?"

"No! That was entirely Fawkes's idea, every bit of it. I was crossing my fingers the whole time in hopes that it was okay."

Hermione laughed merrily. "Oh, it was more than 'okay,' believe me. Phlegm... that is, *Fleur* has been bursting into tears every time she looks at Bill. Well, actually, everyone has. What an incredible gift--"

Harry spoke over her, bitterly recalling Ron's comment. "I said it was Fawkes's idea, not mine."

"I know," she said with affront. "I was going to say, what a gift for Fawkes to give." She frowned at him. "Why are you so snappish?"

"I, uh, I'm sorry. I'm just really hungry and a little tired; it's been a busy week, you know?"

She smiled warmly at him. "In that case, I know just the thing."

From there, the evening became a whirlwind of rich food, champagne, little old ladies gushing their approval of the Sealing, and young ones eyeing him in much the same way as Tonks had in the kitchen earlier that day. Unfortunately, Harry was afraid to look any of them in the eye, for fear of inadvertently trespassing into their thoughts. He made doubly certain to steer clear of Ginny.

After nightfall, a bonfire was lit and there was dancing, then the newlyweds were required to leap over a gauntlet of brooms. Between Hermione and the twins, Harry was forced to dance whether he wanted to or not, but he could hardly complain about having dozens of pretty girls spun and swung into his arms all evening. Eventually he saw that Ron and Neville were among the revellers, though Ron appeared a bit wilted.

Just before midnight, Fred cornered him and pleaded that he make a Patronus, which Harry wanted no part of, but after a drunken lecture about the nature of manhood, Harry finally agreed to it, just to shut Fred up. He slipped into the shadows behind a group of people who were singing loudly, and cast the spell. The stag leapt over the singers and pranced in mid-air with head held high around the bonfire. It finally settled down to the ground before Bill and Fleur, splaying its front hooves to bring itself down into a deep bow before dissolving into silver wisps.

George howled with glee and pummelled Harry's shoulders, but when Fred finished cheering, he yanked Harry off his feet and kissed him right on the lips. Harry still had his wand in hand, however; within seconds, Fred was Transfigured into a sunflower. George was even more delighted by this turn of events, and Harry took advantage of the fact that both were indisposed to chasing him down by slipping off to find the cobbled lane and the hayloft at its end.

The cool mist on the hill at Ottery St. Catchpole was a welcome relief after the bonfire, almost as lovely as the silence after all the crowds. Harry pondered whether he should try to Apparate all the way to London, but it felt so pleasant, he decided to just walk back to the Burrow and use the fireplace.

Harry first heard the footsteps about halfway along the road. He kept his wand firmly in his hand, concealed in his robes, and forced himself to continue the relaxed stride. He was pretty sure there was only one pursuer. It was very hard to just keep walking; his back seemed to have an independent understanding that it could be hexed or cursed at any moment, and it was vigorously attempting to communicate that message to his front. As soon as Harry was beyond the hedgerow at the Burrow's entrance, he dove silently to his left, positioning himself low to the ground with his wand at the ready.

A minute later, Ginny Weasley bolted through the hedge, scanning the garden anxiously. Harry leapt to his feet in a fury. He had never used so many four-letter-words in succession before.

"What is the MATTER with you?!" he demanded. "Out by yourself in the middle of the night--"

"I'm not by myself, I was right behind *you*," she said defiantly.

"Yes, following me around like some kind of bloody Death Eater assassin or something! I nearly cursed you--"

Once again she cut him off in mid-sentence. "Oh, piffle. I'm not afraid to get Stunned."

Harry seized her arms angrily. "I wasn't *planning* on a Stun, Ginny, I was going straight to..." He stopped himself; he was making far too much eye contact. He let go of her, pushing himself backward rather than shoving her away.

"Straight to what?" she said, somewhat haltingly.

Harry couldn't tell her he'd had the Cruciatus Curse on the tip of his tongue before he saw her.

She eyed him apprehensively. "Fine. Whatever it was, you didn't do it. So that's all over and done. Now we can talk. That's why I came after you."

Harry's head was beginning to ache. "Ginny... does it have to be *now*? I'd really--"

"YES it has to be NOW!" she said emphatically. "Because whenever I get within five meters of you, you run off! You've been about for *three days* and haven't even said hello to me, you tosser!"

"Ginny, listen," he said with a deep sigh, but then wasn't sure what to say. How was he to explain that he was only trying not to barge into her thoughts? "I'm not avoiding you, I swear. I'm not trying to be cold. It's just not... *safe* right now. I have this... thing going on--"

"I *know*," she interrupted angrily, then her voice softened. "Everybody knows. That's why I came after you. Harry... I want you to. Look at me. Look in my mind."

He raised a hand to her cheek, gazing deliberately at her lips, recalling her soft, yielding kisses. "Ginny... after I do it... I say things that are, uh, too blunt. I can't help it, I just kinda go flat, like I forget other people's feelings or something."

She pursed her lips, frowning. "What, like cruel things?"

"No, not mean, just... really, really true." He met her eye unintentionally, and hastily looked back down. "Not-to-be-said-out-loud kind of true," he sighed.

"Well, in that case, I insist! I gotta hear this," she said half playfully, half completely serious.

He closed his eyes; his head was swimming with conflict. She was so strong, so much fun, she made him so happy. He had to lock her in the darkest corner of her mind and never open it again, at least not while Voldemort lived. But right now, she was here, safe, inviting...

He was a little girl waiting on Platform 9 3/4, the instant he opened his eyes.

All her life, she'd heard about Harry Potter, the boy who lived. It was impossible that Ron was friends with him. Even though Mummy said it was true--said he'd been right there at the train station the last time--Ron had to be fibbing, had to be teasing her. It was impossible that someone so famous could be sitting on that train with Ron.

And then he was standing right there, talking to Mummy like it was the most normal thing in the world; she could have reached out and touched him, he was so close. She couldn't even remember what she'd said when she saw him, but she was sure it was something totally stupid, she wished she could crawl into a hole, she wished this moment would never end.

She heard the twins talking about using that Muggle car to go get Harry. She daydreamed about stowing away on the adventure, but knew she'd never make it past the twins. Mum was screaming so loud at them that morning, she didn't dare even peek out her window. Then the house was so quiet, she knew they'd blown it, they'd come home empty handed, she might as well go get some toast before they hogged all the good bread. There was Harry Potter at the kitchen table, meekly eating breakfast like he was scared Mum would rain all over him too... and she hadn't even brushed her hair or anything!

*I'm so stupid and clumsy!* She had spilled her drink for the millionth time that summer. But he didn't seem to notice she'd done it, which made her feel even worse; she was so ugly and dull, he deliberately looked at anything but her.

She found the book, she could finally talk about him, then things started to go horribly wrong. And even though he saved her in the end, it was not romantic at all; she didn't get to thank him with a prim kiss before he charged off to greater things, they just all ended up in Dumbledore's office, dripping with disgusting slime while Mum went ballistic.

That was the turning point, seeing him in his filthy robes with that beautiful bird sitting on his shoulder; he was just another big dork like Ron, and although his exploits were pretty cool, ultimately they boiled down to stupid 'guy things' that he was very lucky to pull off. As for herself: how often had she squirmed over some meaningless peccadillo, thinking that everybody would notice and hate her for it... she who had *spent the last year serving Lord Voldemort!* Wearing the 'wrong kind' of shoes or 'last year's hairband' were so absurdly trivial in comparison, and from that day on, she had no use for anyone who cared about such tripe.

She hated Voldemort deeply, personally, for using her, for seducing her with carefully wrought words. Harry was amazed by the hatred; it was an arrow in her mind, sharp and straight, focused, targeted. He knew it wasn't enough. Many had hated Voldemort as much or more, and fallen.

Ginny looked a bit pale, but she wasn't cringing in terror. Harry tried to tell himself that was nice, but gave up the effort; at the moment, he simply didn't care either way. Even though the link was broken, there was still some tendrils spanning between them. He knew she didn't like the way he was looking at her with his head cocked. She thought he was regarding her like a specimen on a slide, as though all her mystery and allure had been used up and she was nothing but a scientific curiosity.

"So much judgment, Ginny."

Her head quivered, as though shaking off sleep. "Huh? Of you?"

"Of you. You despised yourself, until Riddle took you. He taught you the true meaning of despicable. He destroyed the illusions that superficial things mattered. You only carry a few fading shards of it now. Voldemort set you free, Ginny."

There was no connection left to her mind, but her body language was more than sufficient. She looked at him as though he had just sprouted another head. He reflected that in another time, he might have laughed at her expression.

"Your hatred for him is so pure. How ironic, that it was by his hand that you stopped hating yourself." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek softly. "Good night, sweet one."

She watched him cross the lawn and step onto the porch. When the front door closed behind him, she began to run, without a thought for her new dress and shoes, her heart pounding hard and fast all the way back to the hill with the Portkey, and beyond.

*A/N: The poem Fawkes imparts to Harry was composed by the incomparable JRR Tolkien and can be found in the book "Lays of Beleriand" from the "History of Middle-Earth" series.*

## 8: For Worse

Recounts the activities of Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy after their infamous flight from Hogwarts. This chapter was posted on TPP as a stand-alone story, so if it sounds familiar, well, that's why.



Two figures wended their way across the Central Siberian upland, one taller and dark, the other fair of hair and skin.

They were not hunters like the Tunga, who had inhabited the land between the two Katanga rivers for millenia. The Tunga were now known as the Evenki, and the two rivers had been given different names, but none of these changes had meant a thing to the land. It continued as it always had, permafrost and evergreens, inhospitable to mankind, be it wizard or Muggle.

It was a strange thing, for hikers to cross the taiga. To the curious eyes of unseen Evenki, fishing or herding reindeer, the two men seemed to have come from nowhere, and were heading toward nowhere in particular. Nothing but wilderness stretched around them for hundreds of miles. In a way, they had indeed come from nowhere; they had Apparated into this land, but were forced to stop miles short of their target. Now they moved purposefully, approaching a secret encampment, about which the Tunga knew not. It had been built recently and hidden very thoroughly, for its chief inhabitant was not quite ready to entertain unexpected visitors.

Severus Snape stopped to drink from his canteen, peering across the gentle, green slopes of the land. The sun was beginning to set, which, in this remote part of the world, meant it was after midnight. He called to his fellow sojourner to stop and make camp. Had any Tunga been watching, they would have been shocked to see a tent appear out of thin air, looking barely big enough to hold one of them, yet both climbed inside immediately and did not emerge until the next morning.

"Wake up."

Draco Malfoy blinked, recalled where he was, and wriggled longingly under the blankets for a final cozy moment. "I'm up. What time is it?"

"Does it matter? Come on, if we keep moving, we'll make it to the keep today."

Draco settled obstinately into his pillow, holding it tight to his chest. He wanted to say something along the lines of, "All the more reason to just stay in bed," but he dared not. He did not ordinarily fear Snape, but he had other terrifying concerns weighing on his mind, and at this point, he wouldn't risk anything that might cost him the professor's goodwill. Sighing, he set aside his pillow and sat up on the bed, thankful that his feet had landed on a rug today, instead of that harsh icy ground.

Snape had conjured some breakfast on the crude plank table in the tent before he went outside for water, but Draco just sat and stared at his plate. He had no appetite, despite the endless hours of walking the previous day. His stomach was too knotted with anxiety to have room for food. He pulled on his boots, thankful again that they were so well made; despite the mud and water, the leather remained soft, and the soles were still solid. Of course, he mused, if he'd had blisters from his shoes, that would give him an excuse to slow down, to postpone the meeting that would come soon. He picked up his wand for a moment; he knew a hex that would render his feet pathetically travel worn. He set the wand down just as quickly, knowing that the Dark Lord would not be fooled, only annoyed, by such a ploy.

Draco Malfoy burst into tears.

When Snape returned with the canteens, he found Draco sobbing uncontrollably. He understood. It was very difficult to walk with head held high into an unknown but certain doom. Snape sat beside him and put an arm around his shoulder until the worst of the hysteria had spent itself.

"Come now, boy. If you're going to survive this, you must pull yourself together! Don't tell me you are this frightened of *pain*? You've got to get past that, it's a fact of life in his service. You won't last a month if you fall apart in fear of punishment."

Draco sniffled and caught his breath. "I know! You don't have to tell me! It's just..."

Snape nodded. "You've never felt the Cruciatus curse, have you?" Draco shook his head, shuddering. "Well, if that's what he chooses to do, you'll survive it. Take comfort in that! He'll know how much you can tolerate. Hang on to that thought, Draco. You can endure it if you remind yourself that he'll stop before it's too late."

Draco did not look at him, but nodded and tried to compose himself--but after two breaths his face contorted again and a new wave of tears burst out. "H-h-how do you know?"

Snape sighed, and got up to pace beside the table for a moment. "I know because I, too, have disappointed the Dark Lord and had to face his wrath afterward. But I survived, and not only that, Draco, I have even managed to learn a little about him in almost 20 years of service."

Malfoy looked up at him for the first time, his eyes pleading, hopeful. Snape sighed and settled onto his cot in resignation. A day's delay may or may not irritate Voldemort, but the boy would certainly die if he displayed this much terror in the presence of the Dark Lord.

"You didn't do the task that he assigned you. For that, he will punish you. But the task *was* done, and you did have a role in it, though not the one he wanted. And you didn't refuse him, or defy his order, you only... failed to complete it. So he would not lose face if he opted to show you some leniency."

"He sees it this way, Draco: you have proven yourself to be weaker than he estimated. This is a disappointment to him, but in a way, he... appreciates it. After all, if you were strong enough to do anything he asked of you, then you'd probably be strong enough to challenge him. He accepts that his followers have limitations, because he has none." Snape turned his head away, carefully, as he said that last sentence, then returned to meet Malfoy's gaze. "Anyone with no limitations would be his equal. This is why he doesn't simply destroy his followers when they fail him: every time one of th--us fails, it affirms his superiority. Do you understand that?"

Malfoy nodded with a hint of conviction, though fear still shone clearly in his eyes.

"Of course, he doesn't simply forgive failure either," continued Snape. "My hope is that he has used this exercise as a barometer of sorts, to measure where you fit into his

heirarchy. He'll probably test you again, actually--he gave you an extremely difficult task to start with. In fact, he must have expected you to fail. You lacked sufficient training and practice to carry it out, which is a product of your youth--and obviously you have no control over that. I suspect he had... other motives."

Snape paused, but seeing that Draco was clinging to his every word, decided to continue. "Listen to me: this is pure speculation on my part." Malfoy nodded again. "Your father served our Master devoutly during his previous reign, but during the... quiet years, he renounced the Dark Lord and sought power on his own. He became deeply involved with the Ministry, as you know. Lucius claims, of course, that he was seeking only to advance himself through conventional means because he thought the Dark Lord was finished. This is a plausible claim. It might even be true." Snape watched the young man carefully, and was pleased to see that his mouth barely twitched into a sneer, despite his agitated state.

"The Dark Lord is by nature a very suspicious man. He did not gain tremendous power by simply accepting explanations such as that. Lucius could be a spy for the Ministry, or biding time while he plans to seize power, or any number of things. Unless the Master is certain of your father's intentions, he will keep some form of leverage handy, that he can use to manipulate Lucius if necessary.

"It is possible that you are that lever, Draco. It is not unusual for him to invite someone so young to become a Death Eater. But to assign them a task that even *he* would be hard pressed to complete--that is most odd. Now that you have failed him, he is free to do with you as he sees fit. He knows that Lucius does not want to see you humiliated, or placed in the front lines as 'cannon fodder,' so to speak."

Understanding was dawning in Malfoy's eyes. "Is that why Mother is with him, too, then?"

"Of course. He made sure she had nowhere to run but to him, after your attempt on Dumbledore's life. Understand, Draco, that this is the nature of service to the Dark Lord! He will reward you handsomely when you please him, but he will never trust you. He will always have assurances to make sure you dare not betray him. You cannot resent this fact, nor resist it--you have to accept it, or die."

"But as long as I'm loyal, the Master won't need to use his 'leverage,' right?"

Snape nodded. "And as long as your father is loyal, the Master will not need to use you. He undoubtedly appreciates having all three of you close at hand, any of you will suffice to coerce the others if necessary."

"Professor," said Malfoy in a thin voice, "what do you think he'll do to me?"

Snape took a long time to answer. "I don't know. If part of his agenda was for you to fail, his punishment could be rather mild, really. He may have ultimately wanted to test *me*, for example, to see if I would betray Dumbledore when you failed. Had you actually killed Dumbledore, the Dark Lord might even be furious with you, for robbing him of his chance to test my loyalty." Draco nodded again; that concept had never occurred to him.

"On the other hand, if he devised all of this to make a strong point with Lucius, he may be extreme with you. Lucius *did* fail to retrieve the prophecy, and the fact that he was also captured did not improve his standing. I'm sorry, lad. It's impossible to predict what the Dark Lord plans for you."

Malfoy's eyes widened in terror again; seeing this, Snape grabbed tightly him by both arms. "Listen to me, Draco, this may mean the difference between life and death. No matter what he does, you *must not* break down like you are now!

"The Dark Lord despises weakness. There is no surer way to enrage him than to display terror. This, again, is his nature; he exploits weakness automatically, instinctively, just as you are inclined to swat a fly the more it buzzes around you. When the Master sees someone cringe, it does not inspire mercy; it makes him want to inflict greater pain.

"He will make you kneel before him to explain your failure with Dumbledore. Never say that you are sorry, or make excuses like 'you tried your best.' By doing so, you admit that you are weak or regretful, and this will only fuel his anger. You will hold yourself still and speak in a firm voice--not defiant, but matter-of-fact. Leave out any shame, guilt, hesitation, anything that portrays doubt about your actions. Think of it this way: if the Dark Lord meant for you to fail, then you have not disappointed him. You don't know his ultimate purpose, so you should not assume the worst. However, if you indicate that you are disappointed in yourself, he will gladly pursue that concept further.

"Answer his questions honestly. Leave out your opinions. Don't guess or conjecture as to other people's motives, or what might have happened beyond your field of vision. Just describe the facts as accurately as you can recall. Don't try to hide any unfavorable or embarrassing details, because he will know. He will reach into your mind with Legilimency, and if you have misled him, you will suffer greatly for it.

"Stay still the entire time he questions you. Do not allow yourself to tremble, or shift your weight. Once he is satisfied, your punishment will follow immediately. You probably won't be able to stop yourself from crying out when he hurts you, but always try. He expects you to accept your punishment and immediately show your continued loyalty. So, once it is over, get back to your knees as quickly as you can. He'll know whether he has damaged you, or if you are capable of getting up. If you lay there malingering or wallowing in self-pity, he will hurt you again. Get up as soon as you have the strength and the wits. You can wobble a bit, or even fall back down if you must--just don't fall onto him. If, however, you can keep from collapsing by leaning against him very briefly, do it. He rather likes the connotation, that you need him to steady yourself.

Malfoy stared, slackjawed, at his professor, until quietly squeaking, "My father never told me any of this."

Snape nodded slowly. "Your father is a proud man, Draco, as are all the Death Eaters. Many of them are ashamed that they submit to these rituals, like servants, or slaves. Shaming them is another way the Dark Lord exerts control over them."

"Why do you admit it, then?"

Snape stared evenly at the young man for some time. "Because, Draco," he said, slowly and deliberately, "I have also gleaned some things of value from my service at Hogwarts. Sometimes one must swallow their pride in order to be a friend."

Despite the late start, they arrived at a rough stone barracks that evening. It had a thrown-together look, as if constructed in a hurry; some rocks were crumbling at their surfaces, as veins of mineral crystals collapsed inside the substrate from the new distribution of weight. Nonetheless, it was tightly sealed with mortar; it would weather the Siberian winter for a few years at least.

They circled the structure to find a door made of black wood, which hung open but was nonetheless impassable. Five dementors stood guard, two on either side and one blocking the center. Snape approached as close as he could manage without succumbing to dread. He started to say, "We have business inside," but it struck him as absurd to announce something so obvious. He stared at the dementor hovering before the door for a moment, then said, with as much menace as he could muster, "Give way to the Mark."

Nothing happened. The dementors remained in formation around the door, silent and expressionless. Snape cursed inwardly; they were calling his bluff. He weighed the notion of summoning a Patronus. The Dark Lord could interpret that as an act of aggression. Yet these shades hardly had minds of their own; they could force him to stand out here all night, even as Voldemort sat inside, growing more annoyed by the minute at their tardiness. Without knowing whether they had been ordered to keep him waiting, or were simply too stupid to recognize his right to pass, he could not be sure of the proper course. And now that he had accosted them, he dared not back away.

"I see no Mark at the door," said a voice from the dark foyer. They both recognized it at once. The dementors glided apart as Lucius Malfoy stepped outside. He walked up until he was nose-to-nose with Snape, unsmiling, and stared at him coldly.

"There is nothing on your arm but the stain of betrayal, Severus. And my son has not yet taken the Oath." Neither man blinked for a long moment.

Finally Lucius Malfoy took a slow step backward and inclined his head with the slightest hint of deference. "Yet you are welcome to enter the keep. The Dark Lord has

been awaiting your arrival." Snape made a fraction of a bow and strode briskly through the door.

Lucius turned to his son, who showed every sign of wanting to run to him, and raised his fingertips in warning. "Later, Draco," he whispered. "He's watching. You must answer to him first." He made a sweeping gesture with his hand to indicate the door, and Draco, eyeing his father nervously, followed Snape into the darkness.

His father steered him slowly to a large room, lit by only a handful of small torches flickering with eerie green flames. There was a circle in the center, a mosaic of glossy pink chrysopase in the otherwise dull, gray stone floor. Lucius tipped his head toward the circle and gave Draco a stern look. Draco gave him a tiny nod and moved into the center, though his knees shook harder with every step. He started to kneel, but when his father coughed, he looked back with a hopeful expression. His father made a tiny twirling motion with one finger, and Draco understood again; he slowly turned around until his father's hand flicked out to halt him, then he sank to his knees. Lucius gave one last signal to his son, pointing first to his own eyes, then Draco, then the wall directly ahead of him. Draco fixed his gaze straight ahead for a brief instant, then glanced one last time at his father. He was shuddering, his eyes closed, his lips pinched tightly as though holding in a groan of agony.

Though his knees had begun to protest as soon as they touched the cold, uneven floor, Draco would have gladly waited longer before he heard footsteps approaching. A white light, oddly devoid of warmth, suddenly filled the circle, making it impossible to see the spot on the wall beyond, but he had the point fixed well enough in his mind. He noted some movement out of the corner of his eye, and despite himself, his breath became fast and shallow.

"Severus has confirmed that he carried out the order I gave to you, Draco," said the unmistakable voice of Lord Voldemort. He wasn't sure how to respond... was that even a question? He very nearly leapt to his feet and ran; he didn't know what was expected of him, only that the pain would be severe if he failed to perform it. He recalled Snape's warning: *You won't last a month if you fear punishment*. Though he couldn't slow his breathing, he remained kneeling in the light, eyes front.

"I am not averse to my servants assisting one another, at times," Lord Voldemort continued, his voice now coming from a different part of the room. Voldemort was slowly pacing around him, just outside the beam of light; Draco caught a hazy glimpse of two glowing red eyes when the Master passed through his line of sight. "Particularly on important tasks. There was, however, a *reason* I chose you to kill Dumbledore, and I am disappointed that you let slip the opportunity."

Draco was becoming lightheaded from panting so hard, and began to wish the Dark Lord would just ask him a question and get it over with. Presently, though, Voldemort stepped into the light.

"What stayed your hand, Draco?" Voldemort said, continuing to circle him.

He had to speak. He couldn't. He didn't even know the answer; he'd been asking himself the same thing ever since that night. He was taking too long; Voldemort had stopped at his side.

"He... talked... to me."

"Did he? They always do, you know. What did he say?" Voldemort had not resumed pacing; if Draco had not been panting so hard, he could have heard the Dark Lord breathing.

"He said... he said..." Draco had to force himself to think; his mind had gone blank. "He told me not to say 'Mudblood' in front of him." That was the first thing that came to his mind, that Dumbledore had calmly chided him to mind his manners.

Voldemort sniffed. "That would be Dumbledore." Staring straight ahead, Draco could see him in the periphery, shaking his head. "What else?" His voice was sharper now.

"He asked me... how I got... Death Eaters... into Hogwarts. He was so... calm, like we... were having tea." Long, cool fingers began to stroke Draco's hair. He clenched his teeth tightly.

"I see. You felt that your prey did not fear you in the slightest?"

"Yes. I had him... but somehow... he was so sure... he was safe."

Voldemort gripped his hair, though he did not pull it. "And what did you learn from this, child?"

Draco coughed; it had started as a yelp, but he had been inhaling at the instant his fear bested him, so the cry was constricted in his throat. "To strike quickly!" he gasped.

The fingers relaxed slightly. "Very astute," said Voldemort. His tone was even, matter-of-fact, as though he were a professor at Hogwarts explaining a difficult spell. "Most prey, when cornered, will stall for time by pleading, or reasoning—trying to talk their way out of death. It can be amusing, the desperate fantasies they weave for you. But when they don't fear you... It's fascinating, isn't it, Draco? The ones who cower may as well be insects, for all the satisfaction their death brings, but those who look you in the eye, they are truly human, truly alive—the only ones you can truly murder."

Voldemort let his arm fall slack, so all its weight shifted to the hand gripping Draco's hair. Not daring to resist the subtle pull, Draco's head slowly tipped back, forcing his gaze straight into the light over the circle. It was immediately eclipsed by Voldemort's silhouette, stark black against the brightness except for the glowing red eyes. His voice was not so much a whisper as the hiss of a snake carved into words.

"Tempting as it may be to savor such moments, it is a terrible mistake, dear boy. Your father knows; he has made it himself. You will serve as a constant reminder to him never to repeat it." The eyes swung out of view as Voldemort glared outside the circle for a moment.

Voldemort straightened up, though he did not release Draco's head. "I accept your worthy service, Draco Malfoy. You are bound to me until your death." He turned back to Draco and slowly bent over him, eclipsing the light not just with his head, but his upper body; Draco could see his features, not just a blur of shadow surrounded by blinding light. The hand in his hair suddenly gripped his scalp painfully hard. Voldemort looked deep into his eyes and breathed, "Stay very still."

Voldemort leaned closer, too close. His eyes were blazing, though half closed, his thin, white lips slightly parted. Draco knew what was happening. Voldemort was going to kiss him, the same way Draco had kissed Pansy Parkinson in the dungeons under Hogwarts Castle. But unlike Pansy, he could not pull away, not ever, no matter what Voldemort did to him. And unlike the dungeons, his father and Professor Snape were standing outside the circle, watching. They would look on as he surrendered his body to this... thing, not human anymore, but definitely male. *Shame is another way the Dark Lord controls them.* It was too much. He was ready to withstand the Cruciatus curse, but he couldn't submit to this. "Please stop," he begged, only to find that his mouth was so dry from panting that nothing but a thick whimper came out.

At that moment, Voldemort opened his mouth wide, impossibly wide; Draco registered a glimpse of long fangs, then felt them pierce his throat. Venom blinded him with pain; he may have even blacked out. When he came to himself again, he heard something like a waterfall splashing on the floor, felt himself growing cold, saw the bright light grow dim. A strange thought bubbled to the surface of his mind, and he felt compelled to say it, though he could only manage a whisper: "I die without flaw, Master, though I would rather live to serve you imperfectly." He could no longer keep his eyes fixed, or even open. He felt himself slumping backward, but oddly, he found that he settled gently to the ground.

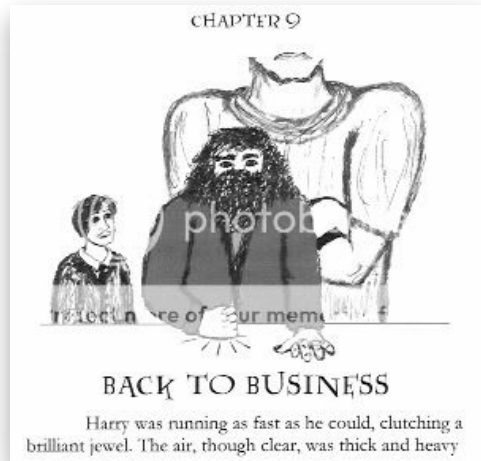
Voldemort waved his wand again, to seal the punctures in the boy's carotid arteries. He had intended to let him die, but that bold comment intrigued him. It was just as well, Voldemort thought. Alive, the boy could be used to torture Lucius even further.

Outside the blinding light, Snape lifted his hand carefully from Lucius Malfoy's mouth, and relaxed his hold on the arm he'd twisted and pinned behind Malfoy's back. Malfoy had bitten his fingers to the bone, but that would heal; all that mattered right now was that Draco would live, Lucius would live, they all would live.

## 9: Back to Business

Chapter 9 of 50

Harry can't seem to win with the ladies, but Lupin makes quite a splash with the Order.



Harry was running as fast as he could, clutching a brilliant jewel. The air, though clear, was thick and heavy like rubber; every step was a Herculean effort that moved him no more than a hair's breadth. He knew the wolf was right behind him.

"Harry Potter." A woman's voice, much louder and clearer than his own cries, or the fierce snarling at his heels. Harry turned, but could see no one. The wolf leapt at him, its jaws closing on his hand and the jewel within it, but there was no pain. "Come find me upstairs today." The wolf was only a soft toy; strange that it had seemed so real just a few seconds ago.

Harry shifted in his sleep but did not awaken.

"Good morning!" said Lupin, setting down his coffee. "Heard it was quite the wedding yesterday!"

Harry was still shaking the cobwebs of sleep from his mind as he dropped into the chair across the table from Lupin's. "Yeah, kinda hard to describe. Fawkes really pulled me through the whole Sealing bit. I had no idea, I thought I was just a wedding guest."

Lupin nodded. "I heard a rumor to that effect. Well, apparently none were the wiser; it even made the Society page in the *Prophet*." He shoved the paper across the table with a wry grin.

"I can't believe you spend money on this rag," Harry said, flipping the pages until he found the headline.

### PHOENIX BLESSES GALA WEDDING

courtesy of *Mots Magiques* news service

DIJON, FRANCE: Hundreds of lucky guests enjoyed

several special treats at the wedding of **Fleur**

**Delacour** of Dijon, and **Bill Weasley**

of Britain. In addition to rubbing shoulders

with a number of high profile guests, they

witnessed the exceedingly rare spectacle of a

Phoenix blessing.

This was brought about by none other than **Harry**

**Potter** of Britain (the same who struck down

You-Know-Who), who reportedly arrived alone but

was soon joined by his scarlet familiar. Potter

exhibited an unusual mastery of the magical beast,

somehow persuading it to rest on the groom's

shoulder for the entire ceremony, an honor which

was last observed in 1873. And as if that were

not enough, the phoenix shed a tear after the  
Sealing (performed by Potter) which healed a number  
of recent wounds to the groom's face.  
The Bonder, **Aristide Delacour** of Dijon,  
conjured ropes woven from unicorn tails for his  
granddaughter's Handfasting...

Without finishing the article, Harry closed the newspaper and folded it several times. "Another well-researched bit of journalism," he sighed.

Lupin chortled warmly. "Oh, come now, you've certainly had worse press than that! Finish the article; they even mention the Order."

"No, thanks," Harry said with a dry smirk. "I've seen enough. 'Mastery of the beast.' That's just rich! They might have mentioned that my 'familiar' turned me into a human fireball a week ago."

As he spoke, Harry suddenly recognized the strange voice that had interrupted his dream--it was the woman he'd encountered in the courtyard that night. "Remus," he said, "Hagrid was at the wedding. Does that mean he and that Ondossi woman are back?"

Lupin nodded briskly. "They are, and they have great news. Apparently the giants in America are very sympathetic to our cause. Hagrid asked to convene the entire Order today, in fact; we're going to use the Great Hall at Hogwarts at 3:00. You should go."

"Wouldn't miss it!" said Harry enthusiastically. "But I think I have an appointment this morning." He told Lupin about the dream.

"You-Know-Who used Legilimency to speak to you in dreams," said Lupin with a frown. "I'm sure she can do it too. She's up in Buckbeak's old room, Harry." He waved toward a pile of pastries on the kitchen counter. "Better have some breakfast first, I have a feeling you'll be there a while."

"What do you want to bet she opens the door just before I knock?" said Harry with a rather cynical sneer.

Five flights of stairs later, Harry found to his disappointment that the door did not swing away from his hand dramatically; it didn't even produce an eerie squeak when he opened it. The room itself, however, was very dark, and its occupant sat at a desk on the far side of the room. She had her back to the door and did not turn around as he let himself in; it would have sent Moody into apoplexy.

"Close the door, please," she said, and Harry did so, though he would have much preferred to leave it open. He stepped just inside the room and waited, unsure of what to say and not eager to stray too far from the exit.

There was very little sunlight penetrating the ancient green velvet curtains, and it took some time for his eyes to adjust. He saw the silhouette of a small but sturdy-looking woman rise from the desk. She picked up a lamp and lit it. Harry was somewhat surprised to find that her skin was brown; he'd envisioned her as the pathologically pale sort. She certainly had the long black hair and dark eyes that he'd expect in a "spooky witch."

Harry began to feel awkward, waiting for her to say something; had she invited him here or not? He finally decided to introduce himself, but just as he opened his mouth, she spoke.

"I know who you are, Harry Potter. You'll forgive me for needing a moment to compose myself."

The lamp flame was flickering erratically, and Harry suddenly realized this was because her hands were shaking. "Is something wrong?" he asked with genuine concern.

She set down the lamp. "I'm afraid of you, Mr. Potter."

That was unexpected. Harry stared at her, slackjawed, for some time before finally mumbling, "You know, compared to many things in this house, I'm pretty harmless, really."

She managed a weak grin. "Cute. I know you even believe that. It couldn't be further from the truth, though."

Harry shook his head, stifling a laugh. This was absurd. "Can I ask you something?" he said, but did not wait for permission. "Do you ever just say 'hello,' or 'My name's Ondossi,' or anything, you know, *normal*?"

"Don't think you'll win me over with humor and charisma, hotshot," she said, though he could hear relieved amusement in her voice. "All right then, introductions take two. Hello! My name is Tura Ondossi. I'm from Northport, Alaska, which is in the USA, across the pond if you will, although technically the closest way to get there from here is over the Pole. I was asked by Albus Dumbledore to teach you about the Dark Arts, and not just their defense either. However, unbeknownst to you, I have explored your mind and I see you have a clear potential to replace the very one you are destined to destroy. Which scares the daylight out of me, because I'm the one that's going to give you the skills to do either, or both." She paused. "Was that better?"

"I think you could have stopped after the part about the North Pole," he said in a strained voice.

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

Harry found that he had too many questions, each one jumping up and down and demanding to be put at the head of the queue. He finally settled on an easy one: "Can we open the curtains, please?" The stuffy darkness was reminding him of Professor Trelawney's overly-perfumed tower.

"Come here and look at my eyes, Mr. Potter." He shrank away from her, taking a step backward; if she really was some kind of Legilimency expert, that was a loaded request. She either guessed or read his apprehension because she quickly said, "In a *harmless* way, of course. Come on."

Harry gnashed his teeth a moment, then strode across the room. Drawing closer, he could see that there *was* something very strange about her eyes, but it wasn't until he was right before her that he could put his finger on it.

They were pure black, blank and empty, like the eyes of a shark. Without even realizing that he was being a bit rude, he stared at her eyes for some time, even leaning around her to get a view of them from the side. She apparently was used to this sort of thing, and waited patiently as he marveled at them.

"It's called aniridia," she said. "The iris--the part that gives your eyes color--I don't have them. In the light, the iris closes and your pupils get small, to protect the inside of your eye from the brightness. Mine don't."

"I was reading when you first knocked," she said conversationally. "I couldn't read now, with this lamp going--too much glare on the paper. Sunlight is unbearable. That's one of the reasons I live in Northpole, there's no sunlight for months at a time in winter."

Her blank eyes were so morbidly fascinating, Harry found it hard to stop looking at them. "Northpole?" he echoed absently.

She smirked. "A little pet name for Northport. The city is above the Arctic Circle. We call ourselves 'Santa's Little Helpers.' You should see the decorations at Christmas,



they're totally out of control. Anyway, do you see, Mr. Potter, why the drapes are shut?"

Harry brought his focus back from the eyes to the person. "Yes. And please, it's just Harry."

"Very good, Just Harry. I'm Just Tura, although you should probably get in the habit of calling me Professor Ondossi."

He nodded. "You'll be leaving for Hogwarts in a few weeks."

"Correction: *We'll* be leaving for Hogwarts *today*. Rubeus is going to describe the next major focus for the Order. And I'm staying there; that painting downstairs is having issues with me."

She probably assumed that, because he was so young, he would be going back to school. "First of all," said Harry firmly, "she hates everyone. Second of all, this is my home, I'm coming back as soon as Hagrid's meeting is over."

"Wrong on both counts," Ondossi replied, equally firmly. "First of all, Mamma Black is scared of me. Second of all, you're staying at Hogwarts, because that's where I'll be. I told you, Albus asked me to come here *for you*. The Defense Against the Dark Arts bit--that's just the day job. I'm here to teach you how to kill Lord Voldemort."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing; she looked about as murderous as a duckling with those big baleful eyes. "No offense, Just Tura, but I think I have that under control."

"Think so, hotshot? Tell me, what do you suppose would happen if (and this is a *big* if) you were to gain the upper hand in battle, when suddenly..."

*...you fell into his mind?* Her words ceased to be made of sound, but formed directly in his mind, like they had in the dream. They were loud enough to drown out every other thought, and evoked not just concepts but images and emotions, as though he were living the words.

*I can tell you exactly what will happen. He would pull you in, Harry, and you couldn't withdraw, any more than you can stop me right now. He'd take you on a guided tour of his memories, a selection of his finest work, just to be sure you understood how horribly you'd failed by not destroying him. And you know what would be the last thing you'd see? He'd show you the view through his own eyes, right then.* She demonstrated; Harry suddenly saw himself, staring vacantly as if mesmerized in the flickering glow of the oil lamp. *He would reach down to your belly--the view dropped from his face to his torso, her hand flat, poised like a spade about to dig into his flesh and plunge his hand right through these ripped abs of yours, reach up under your ribs, and pull your heart out. He'd hold your mind until the end, so you could watch yourself die.*

"Not a pretty sight, hotshot." The return to his normal perspective was so swift, it gave him vertigo. She glared at him, her hand under his shirt, tapping his belly meaningfully.

Harry seized her wrist angrily. "Take your hands off--"

He couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't think; she was in his mind again, a rush of cold fury. He hadn't even been looking her in the eye this time. *Don't you EVER manhandle me*, cheechako. *I won't stand for it.* She shoved him and sent him tumbling backward, but he couldn't summon the will to break his fall. Thanks to the carpet, his ego suffered the worst of the blow, but his behind came in at a close second.

She stepped back out of his mind and, to his surprise, offered her hand to help him to his feet. Harry considered spitting in it for the briefest instant, but took it warily and pulled himself up.

"Look, let's establish right now that I'm the alpha in this relationship, okay?" she said coldly. "There's a reason for that, and not a capricious one: you are a loose cannon, Harry Potter. You stand on the brink of incredible power, one that I can teach you to use. But I don't trust you. Albus did, but we know he makes mistakes, don't we?"

"You and I have more in common than you know. I, too, could become the successor to Lord Voldemort. I trust myself not to yield to that temptation. I may come to trust you as well, Just Harry, and if that happens, I swear I'll stand at your side right up to the final confrontation. But until then I'm the orca and you're a seal pup, capice?"

Harry glowered. "I see you have this all planned out. But there's one problem: I don't trust you, either."

She smiled broadly. "That's good. You shouldn't. Do you know that I could reach into your mind right now and destroy your sanity? You'll notice, however, that I am *not*. Now, if and when I believe that you will show me the same courtesy, I'll teach you how to do it too. And more. Deal?" She held out her hand.

Harry's gaze alternated between her hand and her face. "I don't know. I don't usually strike deals under threats and coercion."

She shrugged. "Well, I can bend you to my will if you'd rather, but what fun is that?" she said sarcastically, then paused. "Look, Harry," she began, much more kindly, "I... you're right, this was not the best way to start off. I really am very afraid of you. It's hard to be polite, act rational, when you're quaking in your boots. I'm not usually this hard-nosed. In fact, I'm still amazed that I knocked you on your keester, that is SO not like me. But it intimidated you, didn't it?"

"You have to ask?" Harry said skeptically.

"Touche', hotshot." She sighed deeply, rubbing her forehead. "Fiddlesticks! Ten minutes with you and I'm already assuming you'll answer me honestly." She shook her head incredulously. "That might be a new record."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to say, or even what to think. "I'm flattered, I guess," he finally stammered, "but I think I've had about all I can stand for one day. Do you mind--"

"Of course. Go pack your things for Hogwarts. Invite your friends to come too, you'll need people to practice with. Come and find me when you're ready to begin."

"Begin what, exactly?"

She grinned wickedly. "Occlumency lessons, hotshot."

Harry's cell phone had enough power for one more call to Hermione. He threw his things once more into his trunk as they talked; he'd just had enough time to settle in before being uprooted again.

"I know, Hermione, but you *have* to, it's only a few weeks early. You could go home again before term starts. But you've got to help me, I can't handle her by myself. She's beyond spooky, she's downright mental!"

Hermione sighed. "Oh, all right. I have to go back this coming weekend, Mum and I made plans, but I'll come for the week. Maybe Ron can take over by then, I think he's had all he can stand of Fred and--" A burst of static drowned her voice. "--be there today anyway, for the meeting, we'll figure it out then."

"You're the greatest, Hermione. This phone's almost dead, I'll talk to you there. Hermione?" Silence, as the phone transformed from a link to his friend into a piece of inert metal and plastic. He tossed it on top of the pile of clothes in his luggage.

With the packing completed, it was time for the real challenge: Hedwig. She was perched on top of the armoire, giving him that special look that she normally reserved as the last sight a mouse would ever see. Belatedly, Harry realized he should have coaxed her into her cage with a snack *prior* to packing.

"Come on, Hedwig, I swear, this is it. No more moves after this. We're going to Hogwarts! You can go up to the Owlery and see all your friends and, and, sleep all day, or whatever it is you do up there. OW!" She had climbed disdainfully onto his hand, only to nip his thumb soundly just as he got her to the door of the cage. She quickly flapped back to the top of the armoire.

Harry finally rifled through the clutter on the bureau and found a scrap of parchment. He wrote a letter to himself: "Dear Harry, This is Harry from last week, hope this finds you happy and content. Yours, Harry." He rolled it up and firmly summoned Hedwig to the window, where he tied the note to her leg, never taking his eyes off her beak.

"I'll see you at Hogwarts, then," he growled. She responded by flapping over to the nearest tree branch and preening her feathers meticulously.

Rolling his eyes, Harry emptied her cage and prepared to take it downstairs, but paused. He wouldn't really need it at Hogwarts—he had only ever used it to carry Hedwig on and off the train. He could come back and get it in an instant if he had to. That thought cheered him immensely; he could get used to this "being of legal age" business. He hauled her cage up to the attic.

On the way back to his room, Harry began to wonder what to do about Fawkes. It seemed rather rude to just head off on a major trip without telling him, but he hardly had the option of calling Fawkes on the cell phone, batteries or no. As he opened his bedroom door, however, the curtains billowed inward, followed immediately by Fawkes, braking himself gustily with his wings. He landed on Harry's pillow with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Is there anyone left in this house who *doesn't* read my mind?" mumbled Harry in mock exasperation.

"I can't," came the grating voice of Phineas Nigellus, "but I never was much for tabloids."

In a rare show of solidarity, Hedwig screeched, Fawkes made an indelicate raspberry sound, and Harry snapped, "Oh, shut it," all at the same moment.

As Harry stepped out of the emerald flames into the Gryffindor common room, he felt the peculiar disconcerting sensation one has in a public place that is otherwise deserted: part disbelief that such a place could ever be so *quiet*, part eerie paranoia that there simply had to be *someone* hiding in there somewhere; both conceivably the product of loneliness of the place itself, the longing of the very walls for vibrant human company. Knowing that he could very well be the only living being in the entire tower gave Harry a bit of the heebie-jeebies. It didn't help that Fawkes popped into existence from a fireball seconds later.

When Harry opened the portrait hole, he was met with a shrill squeal from the Fat Lady. "Good gracious, Harry, you nearly startled the pigment out of me! I had no idea you were in there! I say, who let you in?" she asked with a severe look.

"Sorry I scared you. I took the fireplace."

She sat up at this news, pulling out a pair of ornate opera glasses from somewhere behind her, and peering down at him disdainfully. "The fireplace! Well! Fancy yourself a bit too *grown up* to use my doorway anymore, then?"

Harry put on his most winsome smile. "And miss your lovely countenance? Heaven forbid, milady," he said with a bow. "You must forgive my indiscretion, it was a matter of great expedience."

"Flatterer!" she said sharply, but she turned as pink as her dress and pretended to study a scratch in her frame. Harry grinned from ear to ear; Phineas Nigellus could go matte himself.

"Yoo-hoo!" she called after him down the corridor. "You need to choose a password, darling!"

That stopped him in his tracks. This was a rare opportunity. Weasley is our King? Probably too long, and it would hardly do if the portrait swung open for anyone singing an idle tune while walking by. Perhaps something to annoy Hermione? Eh, too easy. As often happens in such moments, Harry's mind went blank; he'd thought of dozens of amusing passwords over the years, and now that his chance had come, he couldn't recall a single one. He came back and whispered one idea to the Fat Lady's ear, but she turned even redder. "Oh, no, never; I don't care *what* Professor Snape did, we can't use that!"

Harry shrugged; it was worth a shot. "How about 'and the horse he rode in on,' then?"

"That will do," she said primly, though Harry had a feeling she'd be off giggling in her friend Violet's portrait as soon as he was around the corner.

The castle's oak front doors were wide open, revealing a long parade of witches and wizards filing up the walk, wearing robes of every color and style imaginable. For the first time, Harry understood Lupin's breathless enthusiasm about the state of the Order; Dumbledore's Army, indeed! The Great Hall was already nearly full; even though all the House tables had been Vanished, it was clear that not everyone would fit.

Hagrid and Grawp were at the front of the Hall with McGonagall and Lupin, all looking both thrilled and concerned at the size of the audience. Harry tried to edge his way closer, but it was simply impossible, the crowd was too thick. In an instant of panic, he realized that the entire Order could be wiped out with one strike, but forced himself to banish that notion. He noted that nearly everyone shuddered at some point as they filed in, undoubtedly having the same thought.

When the Hall was packed, Professor McGonagall stepped forward, and the susuration of the crowd died down expectantly.

"Welcome, one and all, to Hogwarts Castle. I am Minerva McGonagall, the headmistress of this school. I thank you all for coming on such short notice, though I regret our Great Hall no longer appears to be large enough." That produced a round of cheers. Though smiling, McGonagall waved her hands to restore order, and continued.

"This meeting was convened to address the issue of the Giants. Professor Rubeus Hagrid, along with his brother Grawp and Madame Maxime of Beauxbatons, have developed a plan that will require the participation of the entire Order, to entice the Giants to our side. I yeild the floor to Mr. Hagrid and Mr. Remus Lupin, to explain this plan."

Hagrid stepped forward, his enormous, shaggy beard dwarfed only by his robust smile; he looked so happy that Harry felt like cheering again. "All right then! Let's get right to it! As yeh know, You-Know-Who's been recruitin' whole clans o' giants whenever he can find 'em. Not all of 'em want ter go along with him, but they don' gotta lot o' choice in the matter. Only way teh stand agains' the Clan is to *leave it--an'* they can' just leave, 'cause they got nowhere else ter go. Well, that is, 'til now.

"See, me brother Grawp and me, we jus' got back from America. Big country, tha' one. Plenty o' wide open spaces wi' mountains an' forests, jus' the kinda place fer giants. We was able to meet wi' the local blokes an' strike a bargain er two.

"Turns out You-Know-Who came through there before, durin' his, yeh know, las' round, an' the giants over there didn' take to him. He didn' know them giants kinda *like* Muggles. They got this runnin' joke, see, where they go leavin' tracks in the snow an' such, an' the Muggles all think they come from some sorta monster." Hagrid began to giggle, casting a knowing eye at Grawp. "The Muggles, heh, they gets all worked up, even comin' in helicopters an' whatnot, tryin' ter spot 'Bigfoot.' It's a huge sport, they've got competitions in differen' categories, champions..." Lupin caught Hagrid's eye and tossed his head slightly, and Hagrid fortunately caught the message that it was time to move on.

"Righ'. So as I was sayin', You-Know-Who wen'in with all the usual bluster abou' eliminatin' the lesser bein's, and o' course, these boys saw their main entertainmen' bein' threatened. Not teh mention the Bigfoot thing was wha' brung 'em in as a society, like. Turns out yeh give a giant enough space teh stretch out, an' a good hobby teh keep his min' busy, an' he'll act civilized. So they wasn' interested in the slighates' by You-Know-Who's rubbish. Smart ones even figured he'd be back ter make trouble, an' started diggin' in.

"They wanna see You-Know-Who cleaned up once and fer all. They'll take any giant who wants ter settle there, an' some are even willin' to come here and fight."

Gasps of surprise echoed around the Hall, but not all of them sounded pleased. Hagrid continued to beam, but Harry could see doubt beginning to cloud his eyes. What was the matter with these people, this was better than they could have ever hoped for!

Lupin had apparently been expecting this response; he came forward and patted Hagrid's arm, gently urging him off to one side. "Order, please, order!" he said loudly, and the murmuring slowly ceased.

"Thank you, Hagrid, for your diplomatic efforts. The rest of us are charged with bringing the plan to fruition. Finding, persuading, and moving the last giants will take a concerted effort, and I ask all of you now to consider what help you can offer." Lupin stood firm, with his head held high, as murmurs began anew around the Hall.

"I wonder, Mr. Lupin, if you've asked the right question," said a man loudly from the front of the hall. Harry needed no time to recognize the voice: Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic.

Lupin leveled his gaze at Scrimgeour, and though he must have yearned to say, "And who invited *you*?" there wasn't even a mote of it in his voice. "Would you like to make a motion, sir?"

"I would suggest, sir, that the Order's resources might be better spent on matters other than refugee giants."

The Great Hall immediately went silent.

Lupin's expression remained stoically neutral. "Thank you, sir. However, unless there is a motion, I will ignore that comment." He raised himself to his full height, and scanned deliberately across the room for any sign of a dissenting voice. "There appears to be none. I will take a moment to reiterate that this Order exists for one purpose: to oppose Voldemort." Lupin paused for the usual grimacing and wincing. When he continued, his voice was deep and clear, filling the Hall. "If one of his goals is to eradicate the race of Giants, then our opposition is simple: we will not permit him to accomplish this."

The Hall filled with thunderous applause.

## 10: Santa's Little Helper

*Chapter 10 of 50*

Harry learns a bit more about his new mentor before tragedy strikes.



Harry decided to return to the common room while the crowd cleared, lest he run up and crush Lupin in a jubilant hug. Scrimgeour had made no further interjections during the meeting, but had stalked out with a cold expression as soon as it was adjourned. Harry knew there would be repercussions from the Ministry for Scrimgeour's humiliation; rubbing their noses in it with a conspicuous celebration would only make things worse.

He was heading up the second flight of stairs when he heard someone shouting his name from below. "Hermione!" he shouted back; she was already at the landing of the marble staircase and heading up, pulling Viktor Krum along behind her. Harry instinctively glanced around for Ron, but there were no redheads to be found in the entrance hall.

Hermione dashed up the stairs, her eyes shining with pride. "Harry! Can you believe it?" She hugged him, smiling breathlessly. "He was wonderful! I've never seen Lupin using parliamentary procedure, he just *trounced* Scrimgeour at his own game!"

"I know! It was fantastic!" He had never felt so proud of Lupin either.

"And I have even more good news," she said as she stepped back. "Viktor wants to join the Order!"

Krum looked somewhat abashed as he reached the landing. "Hello again, Harry. I was sorry I didn't find you at the wedding."

"Yeah, me too. That was a wild time."

"Do you think the Order will accept me, Harry?" He looked anxious, almost pleading; there were very few former Durmstrang students in the Order.

Harry shook Viktor's hand, then pulled him into a quick hug. "It's done, Viktor. Welcome aboard."

The three of them lurked on the landing as small groups of sorcerers slowly poured out of the Great Hall, discussing their assignments or simply catching up with old friends. Eventually a brigade of Weasleys ambled into the entrance hall. One of them must have spotted Harry and Hermione, for the cluster of unmistakable red heads suddenly stopped and bobbed together, then separated mitotically into two smaller sets. Ron, Fred, and George clattered noisily up the stairs.

"We're heading up to the common room for old time's sake," said George.

"That, and we're all so hung over we need a bit of quiet," said Ron with a weak grin.

Harry smiled, but his heart wasn't in it; he was following Ginny's red ponytail as it departed through the oak front doors. "Sounds good!" he finally said. "We can have some sunflower seeds."

Fred gave them all dirty looks before he, too, broke down in a good-natured laugh. "The sad part is I can't even remember what I did to deserve it."

"I do," said George matter-of-factly. "I reckon Harry will have nightmares for years."

They spent a lazy hour in the common room, discussing the events of the day before. Harry didn't bring up his encounter with Ron behind the shed, and judging by Ron's warm, easy demeanor, there was no danger of Ron recalling it either. Harry glanced back and forth between Ron and Viktor many times, but never detected any animosity between them. He could understand why Viktor would be an expert at concealing his emotions, but Ron...he might run from them, but he couldn't hide them very well at all.

When the castle corridors no longer echoed with the commotion of many voices, they returned to the Great Hall to find a worn but happy Lupin stretched out on the staff table. "What a day! Fred, George, can either of you... let me see..." He rolled his legs off the table and let their momentum swing him upright, then reached for a long scroll covered with scribbles. He studied it a moment, checking off a few elements here and there. "Can you do Side-Along Apparition?"

"Of course," said Fred, his tone suggesting that Lupin was foolish to even ask such a thing. Harry watched closely; sure enough, Fred glanced at George questioningly and George responded with the barest of unconcerned shrugs. Harry shook his head, grinning, knowing that they would certainly be able to do it soon, though poor Ron might get Splinched a hundred different ways in the meantime.

Late that night, Harry awoke during a horrible nightmare. When he finally fought his way to consciousness, he couldn't remember anything about the dream, only that he'd been struggling. To his great surprise, his scar didn't hurt at all. He settled back into his pillow wondering if he'd only *dreamed* that he'd been having a nightmare, but then Ron let out a bloodcurdling howl that sent Harry scrambling out of bed for his wand.

Ron clawed his way upright, gasping for breath, but seconds later he regarded Harry with an utterly perplexed expression. "What in the name of Merlin are you looking at?" Before Harry could answer, the two of them jumped; a muffled scream was coming from the girls' side of Gryffindor Tower.

Harry and Ron bolted down to the common room in an instant and automatically launched up the stairs to the girls' dormitories, only to find themselves on a steep and slippery slope. Both of them swore vehemently, but to no avail; the stairs apparently considered boys more threatening than emergencies. Hermione's voice immediately sounded from above, firm and deep but with a quiver of fear. "Who's there?"

"It's okay, Hermione, it's us," called Ron. "You screamed."

"I had a bad dream," she called down. "I'm okay. I'm coming down." Ron and Harry knew what that meant; they rolled quickly off the landing lest Hermione plow into them like a Jamaican bobsled.

"I'm so sorry, I woke you *both* up?!" she said, appalled by the notion that she could have screamed so loudly.

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance. "Um, we were already up."

She frowned. "What were you--"

Another scream cut her off in mid-sentence, this one echoing through the open window of the common room.

The three of them ducked out the portrait hole. Sure enough, a cacophany of distant screams rolled through the halls from every direction. The Fat Lady, who would typically grumble at being pestered at such an hour, looked at them with wide eyes. "What could it be? Peeves?"

Harry shook his head, peering down the halls. "No idea." But for the terrified howls, the halls were completely peaceful, motionless. Harry had a rush of adrenaline going; he was all ready to charge off to the rescue, but there was absolutely no indication of the source of danger.

The screaming presently stopped, at least within their hearing, and all four of them gazed nervously at one another. "Maybe I should go ask the other portraits?" said the Fat Lady anxiously.

"Sure," said Harry. "I don't even know where to start looking."

Twenty minutes later, the Fat Lady called them back out of the common room. She was panting. "I've been to every portrait in the whole castle, even the Headmaster's office. No one's seen a thing! Not one thing; you're the only ones even out of bed. But there were screams from the dungeons to the North Tower."

"Group nightmare, you think?" said Ron. "Ever hear of such a thing, Hermione?" She shook her head.

Harry yawned. "Always something new, isn't it? I'm going back to bed."

The next morning, Harry, Ron, and Hermione trooped grumpily down the stairs, hoping that there would be breakfast even though school was not in session. The doors to the Great Hall were open and sure enough, there were a handful of people seated around an impressive buffet at the staff table. Professor McGonagall waved them in, and all three quickly noticed that everyone at the table appeared a bit haggard.

"Sleep well?" said Harry ruefully, helping himself to a piece of toast from a platter. He received a number of knowing looks.

"Did you three wake up, too?" said McGonagall. They all nodded, reaching for the coffee urn in unison. McGonagall turned to Lupin (who looked as if he'd simply been up all night) and scowled. "Well, then, it wasn't just the hold of the castle that was affected."

"What do you suppose...?" began Hermione, but she was interrupted by a jangling at the doors. Professor Trelawney flounced into the hall dramatically, the dark circles under her eyes magnified by her enormous glasses.

"I received a dire omen in the night," she said importantly as she approached the table.

McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Let me guess: a nightmare, around 3:00?"

"Woke you up, but you couldn't remember it?" said Hermione.

Trelawney's bangles and bracelets rang out again as she deflated from her haughty stance. "Well," she sniffed, "it appears that the omen was so important, it was manifest to us all."

"Indeed. What an honor for we non-Seers," said McGonagall drily, as she and Hermione glanced askance at one another.

Professor Sprout presently trooped into the Hall, a smudge of dirt on her cheek and even more under her nails, though her hands had a recently-washed look. "Morning, all," she said gruffly, seizing the entire plate of kippers. "Anyone mind? Only I'm starving, been up since three gardening."

"Nightmare woke you?" said Lupin dully; he knew the answer already.

It was the same as the rest of the castle's denizens trickled in for breakfast, with one exception. Ondossi blustered in as cheerful as a spaniel in a gamebird factory, then stopped abruptly at the row of grouchy faces. From behind her dark glasses, she scanned the group with knitted brows, her smile quickly disappearing. "Oh dear," she said.

"Do you have something to tell us?" said McGonagall, folding her arms.

"Oh, no," Ondossi said meekly. "It's just that I'm not fit for human company." She grinned feebly. "No worries." She turned on her heel and strode out of the Hall.

All eyes inexplicably turned to Harry, who shrugged. "How should I know?" he said defensively, though no one had said a word.

Hermione persuaded him to go to Ondossi's office right after breakfast. "You might as well start these 'lessons,' otherwise you're just wasting time sitting around here. And if you can find out what that was all about, then so much the better." Harry had glared at her, knowing that the latter was her *real* goal, but she was, as usual, correct on both counts. He promised to meet her in the library after he escaped the Spook.

Her door was propped open and she was tugging a battered wooden trunk. Without looking at Harry, she said, "Sure, some help would be nice."

"Wrong question," said Harry. "I was going to ask what you're doing."

"No you weren't," she said wryly. "The polite question was going to come first, that's your nature." She sat down heavily on the trunk. "Did you only come to pry, or are you ready for your first lesson?"

"Why don't YOU just tell *me*?" he asked crossly.

"Because I'm making a lame attempt to treat you with respect. If you'd prefer to be an open book, hotshot, that's fine too."

Harry leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms. "You never answered my question, you know. About whether you ever say anything normal."

She sighed, her shoulders sagging. "I wouldn't know normal if it hit me in the face, Harry. So many things are clamoring for my attention at any given minute, I just speak to whatever seems most relevant. No time or patience to wade through the niceties. Close the door, will you?"

Harry came in, letting the door fall shut behind him as he took a chair. She picked up a thin white wand from her desk and pointed to a candle on the far side of the room, igniting it wordlessly, then took off her glasses.

"Those vignettes that come tumbling into you from people's minds, Harry--they're only the beginning. Within a few weeks, the people you've already opened will be easier and easier to reconnect with. Within a year, it'll happen every time you turn your head. There'll be times when the vision is so clear, you can't tell what's happened, what's *happening*, and what people wish would happen.

"That's why you have to learn Occlumency, Harry. They're not throwing themselves at you, you're barging into *them*, and in a heavy-handed way, too. It makes your soul feel guilty, to inflict people like that--that's why you feel so strange afterward. I like to think of it as a moment of atonement. Anyway, you have to learn to Occlude *yourself*, to keep your mind in your own head, not let it rip open every soft little underbelly that comes along like some kind of cognitive Grim Reaper.

"I became a recluse before I caught on to what was happening, which was probably just as well. Never exactly won any awards for playing well with others. I tried to be a hermit that first summer, but even out on the tundra, I could still hear the animals, the earth... You ever talk to field mice, Harry?" She didn't pause for a reply. "They're imbeciles. Wolves are better company, and they ate the mice too, bonus. But once winter came, I had to go back to Northpole--prey gets scarce in the winter and to a hungry wolf, if you're not Pack, you're Snack.

"Starting that winter, I lived in the steam tunnels below the university. Not a penny for food. I became the Spook, you know, the ghost in the tunnels, rather trite, actually. Slept all day when people were about, then read books in the library all night. Kind of a fairy-tale adventure, except for the rat-and-garbage diet, the filth, and of course, the matter of the hundred screaming voices in my head at any given time. Yeah."

Harry just stared. "Are you making this up?" he said at last.

She opened her arms. "If I'm lying, I'm flying."

"You were my age when this all happened? What about your parents?"

She scoffed. "You ever hear of a Spenard divorce?" Again, she obviously didn't expect an answer. "My father killed her early on--he'd wanted a boy. My... tribe, you'd call it, raised me."

Harry nodded. "You're an Eskimo!"

Her face screwed up with more disgust than when she'd mentioned the rat-and-garbage diet. "Yeah, that's me, my name's Nanook and I live in an igloo. GAH! I can't stand that word. I'm *Inupiaq*. My people were the first to touch the North American continent, crossing over the frozen ocean from Asia. Many that followed went south and became Outsiders to us, but my people stayed where we belonged, in the north with the tundra and taiga and glaciers. But that's a bigger story.

"So, yeah, I lived with my 'tribe,' went to school, started up with the magic, got removed from school and apprenticed to the ~~at~~*fatkuq*, the, uh, medicine man, I guess is the popular word. He really gave it his best shot, but I was *tuunbaq*... bad spirit magic. He finally gave up and sent me to Northpole--"

"Sent you!" Harry interrupted, surprised. "These are Muggles we're talking about? And they knew about the Wizard city?"

She tossed her head, amused. "Northpole was founded about 200 years ago. The Inupiat settled the land about 50,000 years ago. Yes, they knew about the city.

"You have to understand something, Harry. The distinction between Muggle and Wizard isn't as sharp in some places. There are other forms of magic and power in the world that wizards ignore. One of them is the Earth itself. It's outrageously subtle, hard to access, doesn't do anything flashy or immediate, in other words, boring. But it's there for anyone, Muggle or Wizard.

"The Land understands time in a different way from us. It takes 500 years for the Land to blink, and another 5000 to say, "Huh? Did somebody say something?" My people have been on the Land long enough for it to notice us, and we've never left so much as a scratch on it, which it appreciates. We've messed with the Sea a bit, taking its beloved creatures for food, but we've always thanked it profusely and it tolerates us. But the Land trusts my people and has become a friend, and shares its magic."

"With the medicine man--the shaman, then?" said Harry. "I've heard about these things, aboriginal cultures all over the world have them. It all sounds like superstition, but you're saying it's magic?"

"You're quick, hotshot! A different kind of magic, one that can take whole generations just to appear, but so much more... steadfast than this fly-by-night stuff that sorcerors use every day. But less showy. No big kabooms. Mostly."

"Anyway, I'm getting off topic again. Legilimency, yes. So there's me, around fourteen, with too much fast magic for the 'shaman' (I like that word better) to handle. He took me within sight of Northpole and told me to go in. I honestly tried, but it was horrible, nothing but noise and anger--my people couldn't tell I was in their thoughts, but the wizards could."

Harry nodded again; he'd seen the same thing on Privet Drive.

"So I turned tail and went out to the tundra, ate lots of berries, did the wolf thing...that*was* actually like a fairy tale, until winter. Then I had to go into town. After that, it was all cement and rat kabobs. But the cool thing about living inside walls and under basements is that you're *inside the walls*! You can go anywhere you can squeeze into. The Institute was built in the early 1900's. It even has electricity, just because it was such a novelty at the time. But wires and pipes are all hidden inside the walls, with some

extra space for repairs--not like these solid stone castles."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," countered Harry with a knowing grin. "We have a few hidden passages here and there, you know."

"Well, of course you do! But I'm talking about REAL hidden passages, not the kind that someone built on purpose for sneaking around. These are the kind that show up accidentally, left only for plumbers or electricians, that no one maps or knows or even cares about because they don't go anywhere in particular. But they do, they go everywhere! Just not directly. And often there's a hot, nasty pipe you have to go under that roasts your rumpus.

"Anyway, that was how I got my Wizard training, by spooking around the Institute and reading books in the Library attic. Never was much for Charms or wand work, since I didn't have one. But I liked Potions and Herbology--I knew a lot about them already from the Inupiat. Plants are part of the Land's magic.

"Well, when I was sixteen or so, some control freak at the Institute got worked up enough over this unauthorized spook to do something about it, and they sent in the WIFs to get rid of me."

"Whiffs?" said Harry.

"Wizard Investigation Force. Police. 'Aurors,' you guys call them. They were quiet; it was the first time in two years that I'd been able to get within ten feet of another human being and *not* know every little detail about them. That was my first brush with Occlumency.

"The WIFs didn't know quite what to do with me, but this one nice lady talked her neighbors into renting me their shed in exchange for landscaping their property. I can do plants, as I mentioned. The house was on the edge of town, so it was just a dull roar. I found I could manage.

"Well, word got around that there was a Legilimagus in town, and I made up some potions that incorporated a little Inupiat magic, and pretty soon everyone on the block wanted me doing their gardening, too, so I started to earn some money and *buy* food, and even some things. I bought this wand when I was eighteen, it's birch."

She rolled the wand between her hands for a moment, smiling to herself, then looked up at Harry with a brief shudder. "Holy Smoke. I think that's the most words I've ever said in one sitting in my whole life. I don't think I'm going to tell you much more, Harry. I'm going to make you extract it from my head instead. You need the practice."

"Wait, though, before you stop... Why did Dumbledore bring you here to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts? If you don't mind my saying so, it sounds like you don't know anything about it."

"Think so?" she said with cheery defiance. She flipped her wand to the ready, pointed it at the office door and said "*Expecto patronum*." The door burst open and a small herd of silvery caribou bounded silently down the corridor. She raised her brows and gave him a smug smile. "That's just my showing-off Patronus. I make a walrus when I really need it. Big fat fella with tusks like your leg. Let's just say I've had some practical education in Defense, and leave it at that.

"Albus called on me soon after I moved into the shed. Well, not exactly--I never met the man, actually. He sent his representative. An angel," she said wistfully. "Helped me figure it all out--that I could limit what I heard by, well, limiting how I listened. Which is exactly what I plan to teach you, hotshot. Albus had his suspicions about you, you being so susceptible to Lord Voldemort's communication. He wanted me to train you if you turned out to be like me."

"Was Dumbledore a Legilimagus too?"

She frowned. "Oh, no. You have to have a certain... ruthlessness, for lack of a better word. Be willing to oppose the natural order of things to the point that you can actually do it, overstep the boundaries of your mind. I gather he was quite the Legilimens, with wand in hand, of course. But he seemed contented with people's words."

"I can see that. He guessed at a lot of things--usually bang to rights, too. But when he was wrong..." Harry felt his throat tighten and the threat of tears welling in his eyes.

"I know Albus was a good man. I couldn't believe it when Fawkes told me he was dead."

"You can talk to Fawkes?" said Harry, relieved to change the subject.

She shrugged. "Can anybody talk to him? But he gets his message across nonetheless, eh?" Harry nodded sagely. "You should speak to Hagrid, he knows a lot about Fawkes. A real naturalist, Hagrid, and a very quiet mind; I have to concentrate to read him at all, and that almost never happens. Grawpy, too, he's a peach. Gotta be a family thing, though--the Sasquatch giants we met came through loud and clear."

She stood up and reached for her dark glasses, in a way that strongly suggested that the conversation was over. "Now then, do you mind picking up the other side of this trunk?"

Harry stayed in his chair. "Where are you going?"

Abandoning both trunk and glasses, she scrutinized him coolly. "That's for me to know and you to find out. Read me if you can, hotshot." She opened her arms wide and made the slightest bow, as though initiating a formal duel.

Harry smirked and looked into her eyes, once again finding it hard to peer deeply because he was fascinated by their colorless surface. He flattened his lips, concentrating; he could remember how it felt to connect to someone's mind, but he still had no idea how to *do* it. She nodded, and words formed inside his head: *Need a little jump start?*

Harry felt a bit embarrassed, but nodded in return. "Hold up one finger," she said aloud. He did as he was told. *Tap my forehead. Eyes on mine.* He had to stretch his arm to reach her; she leaned back away from him as though the contact was a threat. He barely brushed her brow with a fingertip.

Despite the irritating glare of the windows high above the Hall, he was in a cheery mood from the wonderful progress with the giants the day before. He loved Hagrid and Grawpy, he reflected, even though he barely knew them; they were so genuine. And what a treat, to get out of bed and have breakfast *served*, like he was some kind of spillionaire! He stopped and gulped. Everyone at the table was in a foul mood. He skimmed unobtrusively over the consciousness of the gardener, the linguist, the hotshot, shearing off just the vanguard of their thoughts. They'd woken up screaming. They'd all had the same nightmare. His nightmare. "Oh, dear."

It was the stones of the castle. They didn't know him the way the tundra did. They didn't have any inclination to absorb his dreams, any more than they would soak up the pollutants that the local Muggles poured over them. They were loaded with magic; the thoughts he might inadvertently set loose in the castle would reflect and rebound from the stones until they struck something soft enough to stick. The stern one, she suspected where the nightmare had come from, but there was no point in explaining it. He couldn't live here. There was a nice forest on the grounds, it would do.

"Breathe, Harry." He opened his eyes, though he felt faint, did as he was told, then groaned.

"I just... was you, looking into... my own memory... of your dream." That was so fundamentally wrong it almost hurt to say it.

"I know. It'll get even more convoluted than that, the longer we know each other." She gave him another rascally grin. "But you did it, din'cha? You read that by your own will, even if you did get a little too caught up in it. Remember to stay in your body, hotshot."

Harry coughed. "I didn't *do* anything. It just happened. I touched your forehead and it just happened."

"Almost like magic!" she said, her voice drenched in sarcasm. "You're catching on, Harry. Other people need a wand, a spell... For you, it just happens. Simple as that. Making it *not* happen when you don't want it to, that's the trick. Grab the other side of the trunk, will ya?"

"Wait. Just wait a minute." Harry's stomach was twisting into knots. "I've been doing it all along, that's what you're saying?" She responded only by tapping her fingers impatiently on the trunk. "But it comes on whenever it wants, not when I want it to!"

She sniffed impatiently, then took hold of his wrist and brought his hand to her forehead again.

He was in the courtyard at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. He couldn't sleep; he was anxious about the upcoming meeting with the Sasquatch clans. Was someone shooting off fireworks? A red ball of flame, directly overhead, slowly growing larger. It was going to strike the house, the Dark Lord had found them, they were all going to die. He raised his wand, to explode or deflect it... no. It wasn't evil. A bird made of light, wings folded in a dive. Its feathers were of crimson flame, its chest burned brilliant gold. It was moving impossibly fast, like a falling star.

Every nook, every shadowy corner of the courtyard was aglow with red light. Too bright--he spun away. With his back to it, the red was tolerable again, but suddenly the gold erupted all of its own, so beautiful, but so painful. Then blindness; his eyes were dazzled, they needed to recover before they could process another image.

Someone else was there. This wasn't just the rebirth of a phoenix, it was a Bonding. He had read about this in the attic of the Institute library. One could identify a failed Bond easily, because the human's mind would be utterly empty, consumed by the magic of the creature. He cautiously opened his mind to the stranger's. It didn't quite work; the consciousness of the phoenix saturated the air, making it impossible to focus on the lesser being. He had to ask the old-fashioned way.

"Hello, falling star. Do you still own your heart?"

A man. The phoenix was overwhelming his mind, but he had a mind, an identity. He was young... he was unsettled by his nakedness! Harry couldn't help but laugh, it was charmingly naive, particularly since he couldn't see a thing after that golden light, and was facing the wrong way even if he could! "I guess so. Hee hee! Perhaps you'd like a fig leaf?" Oh, fiddlesticks, he thought, this was hardly the time for jokes. Give him something to cover himself; the young man should be celebrating, not bashfully hiding behind a broom. For that matter, this was no time to meet, there had been enough introductions for one night. "We'll meet again, in the light."

Harry was back in her office, feeling surprisingly abashed, rather like the time Moaning Myrtle had let herself into the tub while he was bathing. "I had no idea I was so charmingly naive," he said with as much *chutzpah* as he could muster, noting that at least he wasn't breathless or faint this time.

"You were!" she laughed. "It was so... innocent. Sweet."

That didn't help. Despite himself, Harry felt his face getting warm. "You know, I don't think anyone's ever described me as 'innocent' before. 'Guilty,' I get all the time, but innocent..."

She drummed her fingers on the trunk, then held out her other hand, palm up. Harry set his fingertips onto hers with some apprehension, but relaxed as the seconds passed and nothing pushed into his mind. They remained there, wordlessly, for some time, until she interlocked their fingers in a brief squeeze and pulled away.

"You getting it now, Harry?" she said. "There's no 'it.' 'It' is *you*, your magic, and you're always 'on.' The only reason you're not constantly flooded with people's thoughts is that this magic is barely starting to blossom. What we're doing will accelerate the process--in fact, if you touch someone else's forehead like that from this day on, you'll find yourself drowning in them. I've been Occluding you from all but a glimpse of my thoughts. I'll teach you how."

He nodded. "You know, this is a lot better than my last Occlumency lessons."

"Your last teacher had a long row to hoe, hotshot. Now pick up the trunk."

Hermione was alone in the library but for Madam Pince, who was sitting at her desk cataloguing some new acquisitions, glaring suspiciously at Hermione every time she heard the rustle of a page being turned. Harry pictured Ron standing before this librarian and dog-earing a page as he had done in Godric's Hollow. It made his feet and hands tingle. Some things are better left unimagined.

"Harry!" Hermione said brightly. "It's lunchtime already! I was beginning to wonder if you'd be back."

"Yeah, I ended up helping her move."

"Move? Where?"

Harry explained about the nightmare. "She wanted to sleep in the Forest until I told her about the centaurs. Then she asked if Professor Sprout might let her live in one of the greenhouses!"

Hermione made a face. "She'd be plant food! Why doesn't she just go let a room in Hogsmeade?"

"She's impoverished, Hermione. She calls it 'dirt floor poor.' She lives in someone's garden shed back in America."

Hermione looked nonplussed, then shrugged. "So where did she finally move?"

Harry looked down at the floor, grinning. "I took her out to the Shrieking Shack."

Hermione laughed. "Perfect! The legend lives on."

"What've you been up to?" said Harry, inspecting the open book on the table in front of Hermione.

She flipped back a few pages. "This is the *Indicus Magi*, it's an encyclopedia describing the specialists, if you will, in different magical fields. I thought I'd look up Legilimagi, but I got a bit distracted, there's some fascinating stuff in here. Anyway, I haven't read the whole section, but here it is, maybe you should just read it for yourself."

Harry leaned closer to the yellowed parchment, took in two sentences that were so dry it was like eating sawdust, and gave Hermione a winsome grin. "Maybe you can just sum it up for me on the way to lunch?"

"Honestly, Harry..." she said with a scoff, but relented, slamming the book shut (to the consternation of Madam Pince) and getting up from her chair.

"Legilimagi are uncommon," she said as they headed downstairs. "There's rarely more than one or two alive at any given time, which has led to speculation whether their magic is some sort of external force--you know, that bounces from person to person--or whether they tend to, *ahem*, annihilate one another, although there's simply no proof of that."

"*Neither can live while the other survives*," quoted Harry thoughtfully.

She rolled her eyes. "Voldemort's not a Legilimagus, Harry. We'd all be dead if he were. It's an incredible power, virtually limitless..." Her voice tightened with concern as it trailed off.

"Hermione?" said Harry in a subdued tone. "Does that scare you?"

She stopped, looking down at the floor between them, and took a moment to think before replying. "A little bit, I guess, Harry, but I know you're just... you. You wouldn't use it to do anything horrible. I'm more scared by all the implications that come with it--that you're going to change, to become more powerful, people will be scared of you even though you don't want them to be and don't deserve it..." She sighed, still staring at the floor. "Like I am now. You're right, Harry, I AM afraid, knowing you could be inside

my head if I look you in the eye. I'm not sure at all that I want you in there. Even though I know you're still the same old Harry."

"You wouldn't want me in your bathtub either."

She giggled and looked up at him despite herself. "What?"

"Something Remus said--that having me in his mind made him feel he couldn't get much more naked. It's funny, a year ago if someone had said, 'Hey, I can step into your mind and look at your deepest secrets,' I would've steered clear of them too. I *hated* letting S--HIM do it, that was like torture, but at least he had a wand, I could see it coming. But now that I'm doing it, all I can see is how amazing it is, what a privilege, to see right to the core of someone... it's beautiful." He stopped, suddenly feeling self-conscious, but Hermione was gazing at him so warmly that he grinned in relief.

"Harry... it's nice to hear you speak of it that way." Her eyes suddenly widened in alarm and the warmth disappeared as she dropped her gaze back to the floor. "But I remember what you once said about your cousin Dudley, that it would be like diving in maggots to read his thoughts. Not everyone is beautiful at the core, Harry."

Harry studied her, frowning thoughtfully. "Or they think they're not beautiful." She bit the inside of her lip, and Harry knew he'd struck a nerve. "That's what scares you, isn't it? That I won't like the secrets you never share?"

Her eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. Harry's jaw fell, and he instinctively pulled her into a tight hug. He wasn't sure what to say. He had no idea what she was afraid he'd find out, but he couldn't imagine anything that would diminish her in his eyes. He settled for stroking her bushy hair (which was challenging enough, to avoid snagging or pulling it) until she composed herself.

"Harry, can you promise me something?" she finally whispered, pressing her head against his chest.

"What?"

"If you ever get inside my mind...accidentally, or invited... don't look at my dreams."

He peered through the brown, fuzzy thicket of her hair with a quizzical expression. "Your dreams." He had to ponder that a moment; was that possible? He remembered Lupin's mind, that was his clearest experience so far. He could see the separate bits that made up the whole, though at the time he hadn't tried to pick and choose among them. Could he have avoided Remus's dream? It had an unreal hue and tone, unlike the crisp, solid memories. He chose to skip certain topics; why couldn't he skip dreams? "Yes. I can do that, Hermione. I might stumble into one, I suppose, but I can step right out if that happens. I'll promise that."

They resumed their descent. Harry was even able to make her laugh, describing the two memories Ondossi had shown him. "She calls me 'hotshot.' And I still don't know what a 'spillonaire' is--" Harry stopped abruptly as they rounded the bend to the landing above the entrance hall. Both of them gasped.

Dozens of people, bleeding and bandaged, were scattered around the hall below them. Madam Pomfrey was scuttling between people with a basket of potions and a determined expression. Harry and Hermione turned to one another as if to confirm that the other was seeing the same sight, then dashed down the last staircase together.

"Harry! Hermione!" Lupin had spotted them, and met them at the foot of the marble stairs. "I'm glad you're here. Help Madam Pomfrey, she's spread very thin and needs runners. I've got to leave to summon more help. The Floo Network is down and people are having to Apparate into Hogsmeade. Hagrid's got one carriage bringing in wounded. Once Pomfrey has this group taken care of, see if you can help Hagrid get some more thestrals harnessed."

He turned to the oak front doors when Harry seized his wrist. "Remus, first... what happened?"

Lupin turned his head but not his body, and closed his eyes with an expression of overwhelmed exhaustion. "Simultaneous attacks, Harry. London, Paris, Zurich, Madrid, probably more, but we've only confirmed those. Voldemort himself came to London. They've pretty much destroyed the Ministry of Magic."

## 11: Aftermath

*Chapter 11 of 50*

Britain reels from Voldemort's strike. Wild magic produces the world's most annoyed demon. A moment of despair is followed by a moment of The Pear.



Hermione threw her hands to her face in horror, but Harry felt a flood of relief. Voldemort's axe had finally fallen after far too many quiet months, and it was the Ministry, not the Order, that was under attack. He needed no time to collect himself, dashing off immediately to assist Madam Pomfrey.



"Potter, thank goodness. Take those blankets over there and give one to everyone. Even if they don't want one; tell them you know it's warm but they're in shock. Cover them up yourself if they can't. Then get water and give it to everyone with a pink ribbon, and only the pink! Any other color means they need attention before they get any food or water. If they don't have a ribbon, they go over by the front door for triage. Got it?" Harry gave a single sharp nod and the two of them parted ways without another word.

Handing out blankets proved to be a more challenging job than he expected. Some people wouldn't answer him, while others delayed him as they tearfully recounted their personal experiences in the attack. Harry eventually assembled the outline of what happened: every entrance to the Ministry had suddenly been mobbed by Inferi, who created chaos while a band of Death Eaters stormed through the building, casting deadly and destructive spells at any target they could find. There were injured people from every floor except Level 10, where the courtroom was situated; Harry guessed that either the Wizengamot had not been in session when the attack fell, or it had been completely wiped out.

Voldemort had outdone himself with cruelty, using the cadavers of former Ministry employees as his stock of Inferi. Their animated corpses had to be literally cut down to stop them. Everyone understood, intellectually, that these were just the empty remains of the people they had known, but to their hearts, it didn't matter.

St. Mungo's was overrun with wounded, so any who could Apparate were being sent to Hogsmeade. Unfortunately, being of sound enough mind to Apparate didn't necessarily mean that their injuries weren't severe, and Madam Pomfrey was the only healer. When Harry finished distributing blankets and water, he regarded her anxiously, wanting to help but without an inkling of what to do.

"What can I do next?" he said, sprinting beside her between patients.

"Run up to the hospital wing and bring down everything you can carry." She barked her request without looking at him, focusing on the next injury. Harry made four trips to the third floor, until every potion, pillow, bandage, and bedpan he could find were in the entrance hall. He noticed Hermione again for the first time, organizing the supplies onto different steps of the marble staircase. "That's everything," he told her, and he swept up the pile of blankets for delivery to the latest arrivals.

The influx of injured people had already peaked by that point, and was slowing to a trickle. Harry made another round with pitchers of water, then one more sweep of blankets, before he began to sense, for the first time, that things were becoming manageable. Madam Pomfrey had stopped running between patients and was now ministering to people that, as far as Harry could tell, had milder injuries. Harry glanced for the first time at the watch of the nearest patient and discovered to his surprise that he'd been tending the wounded for four hours. He leaned against the balustrade for a brief rest, when he suddenly recalled that Lupin had told him to help Hagrid. There could be a huge queue of injured people sitting in Hogsmeade right now, waiting for transport to the castle!

With a quick word of his intentions to Hermione, Harry charged out of the castle and was well down the road to Hogsmeade before he realized with a start that he had no idea where the wounded people had been Disapparating. Fortunately, Hagrid was leading a carriage toward him from around a bend. "Hagrid! Do you need help?" he called, waving down the coach.

"Harry!" Hagrid's worn face cheered up immediately. "Nah, we're good. Could'a used yeh about two hours ago, but nobody new in the las' twenty minutes. Think they've finally got everyone outta the Ministry. You okay, Harry?"

"What? Yeah, I'm fine."

"Look a bit pale. You had summat ter eat?"

Harry hadn't realized he was hungry until that moment, when four hours of missed lunch all reared their stomachs at once. "Not lately, no."

Hagrid scooped Harry onto the carriage with one enormous hand. "Not good, Harry. Firs' rule of rescuin': don' endanger yerself. Las' thing anyone needs is teh have ter rescue *you*. Here," he said, tossing Harry a sack from the floor of the carriage. Harry peeked warily in the sack, then reached into it with relief; it was full of pears.

"What do you know about the attack?" Harry asked before taking a huge bite.

"It was bad, Harry. Firs' place they went was Law Enforcement. Lotta Aurors in St. Mungo's."

Harry dropped the pear. "Tonks?" he said, horrified.

"No, no!" said Hagrid, quickly. "Thank goodness, no. Most'a the Order were out with the giants at the time. Lupin's in a righ' state, you know, if he hadn' put the plan together so quick, they'd all be in the office. Bit of a close call, left him feelin' like someone stepped over his grave, yeh know." Hagrid pulled the carriage through the front gate onto the Hogwarts grounds.

"Where is Remus?" Harry asked.

"He's still at the Ministry," said Hagrid.

"Stop the coach here," said Harry abruptly, leaping off before it came to a halt. "I'm going to London." He reached for another pear, but Hagrid handed him the whole sack.

"Take him some food, then, an' be careful, Harry."

Harry had to pause a moment with an incredulous look. "You're not going to tell me not to go?" he said with a wry grin.

"Yer a man, now, Harry; can't order yeh aroun'. Besides, yeh'd do it anyway. Go help Lupin, he needs yeh."

Harry felt a flush of pride warm his body and regarded his friend warmly for a moment. Hagrid cracked the reins and the coach pulled forward before Harry could spot the tears brimming in his eyes.

Once outside the Hogwarts gates, Harry quickly Apparated straight to the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Having only encountered Inferi once before, under Dumbledore's protection and in near-total darkness, Harry was unprepared for the gruesome scene left by their invasion of the Atrium. The room was strewn with limbs, torsos, heads, all a pale greenish gray. There was no blood, he noted thankfully, which made it seem less real, more like an explosion in a mannequin factory, save for the occasional twitch from the larger, more complete pieces.

Harry peered around hopefully for a ruddy complexion, but there was none to be found. He wasn't surprised; there wasn't much point in hanging around this disgusting spectacle, and there were more important things to clean up than icky bits like these. To his surprise, he found that the elevators were still working, so he took one up to Level Six.

His hunch nearly paid off; he found a crowd of living, breathing people in the Floo Network Authority, though he learned that Lupin had not been there in some time. "I don't know where he went," snapped the witch he approached, who didn't look up from the maps she was laying out on a wide table. She had a long abrasion on the side of her head, probably where she'd been skimmed by some spell. "Look, I'm busy here, the Floo Network is a disaster. Try MLE."

Harry nodded. "Good luck," he said simply, holding out a pear. For an instant, her forehead relaxed and she looked up at him with a hint of a grateful smile. "You too," she said kindly, then returned to her maps with a crunch.

Harry nearly plowed into Arthur Weasley as he stepped off the lift on Level Two. "Ho, Harry!" he said without breaking his stride. "This way." Harry followed him down the short hall to Auror Headquarters, or what was left of it. There was no sign of the orderly rows of cubicles that had been present on his last visit; the room was a shambles of rubble, paper, and scorch marks. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody were having an intense discussion, not even noticing when the two of them walked in.

"We *may* have a solution, gentlemen," said Arthur, and both Aurors looked up, greeting Harry warmly but regarding him somewhat dubiously.

"Caught a prisoner," said Moody. "Need to interrogate him, and not a drop of Veritaserum in the place. Think you can help?"

Harry took a short but deep breath. "I...I don't know. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you tell us if he's lying or not?" asked Kingsley.

Harry bit his lip and looked at the floor, wondering for the second time that day if he had enough mastery of Legilimency to use it in a specific way. He frowned; that was something Sn-HE had mentioned during lessons, that Voldemort could expose lies, but Harry wasn't sure how to do it. Yet. But there was one thing he could do. "Hold on. What if I just go in and look around? Eliminate the whole questions-and-answers part?"

Moody and Kingsley eyed one another uncertainly. "Thought you weren't quite doing that yet," said Moody.

"I've been getting lessons," Harry said cautiously. "I can give it a try."

"No," said Mr. Weasley firmly. "You two can use Legilimency on your own. The issue is whether we can believe what we learn. Harry, if you can't sort lies from truth, then you shouldn't get involved."

"But I want to help!"

"I know. But leaping into a hostile mind is dangerous, especially since you... go so far." Harry suddenly recalled Ron's drunken confidence that Mr. Weasley was jealous of him for reading Molly just before the feast. For a split second, he wondered with a flare of indignation whether this was some sort of payback--if Mr. Weasley was deliberately keeping Harry from showing his worth in retribution for having that moment with his wife. Just as quickly, Harry felt ashamed of himself for even considering such a thing; Arthur Weasley had far too much integrity to harbor a grudge, much less act on one.

"Tur--Ondossi did mention this can make people insane," he conceded. "Maybe I'd better not. She could do it, though--where is she?"

All three of them shrugged. "No one's seen her," said Kingsley, and Moody looked as though he didn't particularly mind. "Not that she'd know how to find the Ministry, I suppose, she's not exactly from around here."

"I'll see if I can find her for you. But right now I'm looking for Remus."

"I think he's on Level Nine," said Arthur.

Harry got onto a lift with a sense of foreboding. The Department of Mysteries was on Level Nine, and it was hard to imagine anything benign that Lupin could be doing down there. It didn't help that the overhead light was flickering blue and orange, or that the car seemed to be descending at half the normal speed. Harry pointed his wand at the lamp irritably and extinguished it, which naturally left him in total darkness. "*Lumos*," he said to light his wand, but unfortunately it was still pointing at the lamp; both of them came on, restoring the annoying flicker.

Harry was in absolutely no mood for this nonsense. "Devilspawn!" he cursed in annoyance. Instantly a third light appeared at his feet; a creature about five inches tall, vaguely resembling a winged red centaur, shook a tiny fist at him from a circle of flames.

"And exactly what kind of Summoning was that? Pathetic!" it squeaked, rearing angrily.

Harry glared down in disbelief. Wild magic again, he thought. "My mistake. Sorry."

The little demon settled back on all four hooves. "Sorry? You bring me here *like this*, not fit to slay a bloody hamster, and all you have to say is 'sorry'? Tosser!" It poked Harry's shoe insolently with its trident and disappeared in a puff of acrid smoke. Harry felt it best just to ignore the light for the moment.

He broke out in a cold sweat as he stepped off the elevator; he hadn't been back to his floor since the night Sirius was killed here. It was hard to believe only a little more than a year had passed. Looking down the long corridor that led to the Department, his heart ached with renewed grief.

The main entry door had been blasted off its hinges. Harry stepped over the debris into the round room, its candelabras burning with their usual blue flames. Most of the other doors were missing or splintered, and the room showed no sign of its usual behavior, which was to rotate the walls into a wild blur and disorient its occupants. Harry reckoned there wasn't much point to it; one closed door looks like another, but each broken one would remain unique, no matter how dizzy the observer.

Remembering the maze of interconnected rooms behind those curved walls, Harry stopped just inside and called, "Remus?" There was no response. Sighing, he turned to the left and poked his head into the nearest door. It was pitch black inside; not even the blue glow from the candles penetrated beyond the doorframe. There was a sound like thousands of little wings flapping about, and Harry felt little gusts of air brushing his face from all directions. He yanked his head out quickly, feeling rather lucky that it was still attached to his shoulders--this was, after all, the Department of Mysteries.

The next door opened onto a long, empty corridor; Harry called out again and decided it would be more efficient to try all the doors before a lengthy exploration of each one. He eventually came to the great square room lined with tiers of stone benches; this was where Sirius had fallen. Harry felt a wave of nausea and desperation as he stood before the mangled door, but he knew intuitively that Lupin was within.

Harry poked his head inside and beheld a gaunt man in ragged robes sitting on the dais in the center of the pit below. The stone archway with the tattered veil was intact on the dais, apparently too powerful for the Death Eaters to destroy, though it looked like it would crumble if a butterfly landed on it. Harry set his jaw anxiously; he recalled only too well the hypnotic attraction of the veiled arch, and the voices that seemed to murmur behind it. He strode resolutely down the stone steps to the dais.

"Remus." Lupin didn't even move, much less reply.

Harry climbed up on the dais, feeling the irresistible enticement of the archway playing over his heart, but he ignored it. "Remus!" he said sharply, and dropped to one knee beside his friend. Lupin didn't take his eyes from the arch, but he sighed and leaned slightly toward Harry.

"Will you come out of here with me?" Harry asked, giving Lupin's shoulders a gentle tug.

"It would be so easy," whispered Lupin. Harry knew he was not talking about leaving the room, at least not by the doors above. He sat crosslegged beside Lupin, keeping a hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Easy. Yeah, I guess. Not particularly brave, though." Harry wasn't sure what to say.

"Courage is getting in short supply lately, Harry," said Lupin, swaying slightly.

"I don't know, I saw quite a bit today."

"You weren't *here*." Lupin's tears made tiny splashes on Harry's fingers and the fabric of his robe, but he continued to stare vacantly into the veil.

Harry reminded himself again to ignore the murmurs from the archway and put an arm around Lupin's shoulder, obtaining a more solid grip on the older man.

"Scrimgeour is dead," said Lupin in an empty voice. "Voldemort did it himself. He was so stubborn, a real thorn in my side in a lot of ways, but a fighter. Strong." Lupin

began to tremble slightly. Harry nodded, but could come up with no reply. They sat in silence for a long time.

"I'm next in line," Lupin whispered at last. "There's no more Ministry. The Order is the last coherent force opposing Voldemort. He'll come for me personally, like he did for Rufus. He'll come, and I'll fall."

"This would be easier, wouldn't it?" said Harry slowly, looking at the archway and relaxing his grip slightly. "Painless. Not like he has planned for us."

For the first time, Lupin's expression changed, his brow furrowing in confusion for a brief instant. "Us."

"He'll come for me too, Remus. I'm his ultimate prize." Harry rose to his feet. "Escaping through that arch would make him angrier than anything else I could do, I think."

Lupin stood too, unsteadily; he had been sitting on the cold stone for a long time.

"And we'll see Sirius again," breathed Harry.

Lupin took his eyes from the veil. "Harry."

"Take my hand, Remus," Harry said in a distant voice. "We'll do it together."

"Harry!" Lupin seized Harry's shoulders and whirled him away from the arch, pulling him, stumbling, to the edge of the dais. Before he could leap off and drag Harry with him, Harry suddenly gripped his forearms. Lupin's eyes, wide with shock, slowly resumed their normal size as he understood the fortitude in Harry's gaze.

Lupin blinked. "You weren't planning to go through at all, were you?"

"No," said Harry grimly. "But I knew you'd have to stop me."

"That was a dirty trick, Harry," Lupin said dully.

"Worked, though."

Lupin mustered a weak grin in response. "Oh, it worked for *you*, got you what you wanted, I guess. I'm not so sure it worked in *my* favor."

"That's enough!" spat Harry. "You can't give in to despair, Remus. I need you! You're the only family I have left. I can't do this alone." Though Harry had never said or even thought of those words before that moment, he meant them with every fiber of his being. Even though Harry despised Rufus Scrimgeour, the news of his death made him want to weep; the killing had to stop, it *had* to. "I can't bear it if he takes everyone from me."

Lupin suddenly pulled Harry into a tight embrace, and for an instant, each man felt secure enough to stop the gap through which his courage had drained.

"Do I smell pears?" Lupin finally asked.

Harry smiled. He picked one up and handed it to Lupin, then began refilling the sack, which he had dropped, unnoticed, on the dais at some point. One of them had broken on the floor into a slimy mush. Harry glanced askew at the veil as he picked up the solid part that remained, then threw the pear violently into the archway. It passed through the fabric without a sound or a ripple, as though it had struck a sheet of mercury.

He sighed; he'd thought perhaps he might get a glimpse beyond the veil when the fruit whipped through the fabric. No such luck. Harry gathered up the last of the pears and jumped off the dais to join Lupin for the climb to the exit.

There was a thump and Lupin lurched forward, and both of them spun about, reaching for their wands.

The broken pear had bounced from Lupin's back and landed on the ground with a moist splat. Though neither man would admit it, even to themselves, each had, on the very edges of their consciousness, heard a distant, familiar bark of laughter.

## 12: Summer's End

### *Chapter 12 of 50*

The last few weeks of the holidays are spent in study and planning. Harry learns a bit more than he wants to about his new mentor.



Harry wanted to accompany Lupin back to Headquarters, but Remus wouldn't hear of it. "You have one assignment in the Order, Harry, and that's to hone every skill you have. I'm all right; Adora will be home soon. Get back to Hogwarts."

Harry Disapparated just outside the front gates intending to make a hasty march to the basement kitchens. He'd made it halfway to the entrance when Hagrid's voice boomed at him from across the grounds. "All right, Harry?" he called, charging up from his hut with great strides that made the earth tremble.

"Alive, at least," Harry called back. "Starving. You?"

"Just finished seein' ter the thestrals. I could do with a little summat."

The doors to the Great Hall stood open despite the late hour. They found Ondossi at the head table whipping ice and butter together in a big bowl. "That looks good!" said Hagrid enthusiastically.

"*Akutaq*," she said, scooping some sugar into the bowl. "I spent my afternoon in Northpole. I brought back these berries. It won't be quite right without seal oil, but you do what you can. Want some?"

"No, thanks," said Harry immediately, but Hagrid grabbed the nearest spoon in anticipation. Harry had a feeling that Hagrid's already dreadful cooking would soon be taking a turn for the worse.

As soon as they sat down, their plates filled with food. The rush of warm, savory steam soundly reminded Harry that he'd skipped lunch. Ondossi stirred her bowl and chattered as Harry and Hagrid plowed through their suppers. "I thought I'd better see if they needed me at home," she said, tasting the frothy butter and reaching for the sugar again. "Northpole got hit worse than Area 51. The capitol," she added as an aside. "Northpole's the largest Wizard city, but it's too remote to be the center of government. 'We don't make the rules, we just break 'em,' is our motto." She giggled. "Northpole's sort of the last refuge for people who don't like it anywhere else. Which is probably why the Dark Lord takes an interest in it; probably figures we're all a bunch of malcontents ready to sign up with him." She winked at Hagrid.

Hagrid bellowed with laughter. "Harry, yeh'll never find a surlier bunch of lunatic wizards as in Northport. Every one of 'em a stubborn loner, but give them an excuse to crack open a bottle or two and they run wild in the streets. But none of 'em looked ready to sign up wi' You-Know-Who."

Ondossi nodded. "Worse than cats. But he apparently doesn't understand that--he mistakes wanting to be left alone for wanting to belong. But he had his revenge today; burned down half the Institute and the WIF headquarters. He sent ten Death Eaters, but they only caught three."

"Tura!" Harry said loudly, "That reminds me! They could use your help at the Ministry?"

She glared up from her bowl, suddenly going from conversational to scathing. "They could, could they?" was all she said.

"They have a prisoner they're trying to question, you could really speed up the process--" Harry didn't get a chance to finish the sentence, as she slammed the spoon into the bowl so hard that a buttery hail clattered over all three of them.

"Not gonna happen. End of conversation." She dumped the pile of berries into the remainder of the cold butter, clanging the rim of the plate against the bowl.

Harry gaped at her briefly, then found his voice. "What's the matter with you? These are *our people* I'm talking about, from the Order. They--"

Once again, he was cut off in mid stride, this time when she raised the spoon as if to crack him over the head. Harry pushed back in his chair and even Hagrid set down his fork. "Easy there, Tura," chided Hagrid gently. She retracted the spoon a few inches, but continued to give Harry a venomous glare.

"Let me tell you a little bit about your *Ministry*," she said with cold contempt. "Do you know what happened when I first came here? At Dumbledore's request, you know, to teach at Hogwarts. They *informed* me that I needed a *work permit* to earn money doing magic in this country. The Dark Lord running loose and *I* need a Green Card to teach your citizens how to defend themselves. Nice. Being inflexible and obstructive--that's how bureaucracy creates the illusion that it has actual power. I ended up having to accept this position as a volunteer, without pay. Although it's nice to have food and a place to sleep and all--it's just the principle of the thing!"

Harry felt as though he should argue, but he hadn't been much impressed by the Ministry for some time. She seemed to have reached the end of her rant; she sat back and began folding the berries into the butter. He settled for one more cautious attempt at persuasion.

"Tura, listen, these are people from the Order, not the Ministry. Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt."

She set her jaw, but took a deep breath and answered him in a level voice. "Look, I don't even help the WIFs with interrogations. Why do you suppose that is, Harry?"

"I can't even begin to guess."

She laughed. "All right, hotshot. You know what it's like after you charge into an unwilling mind? That blank feeling? Where you can't seem to say anything but the truth? Feh!" She made a bitter face, probably the same one he would make if he ate some of that frozen butter. "You're compromised. They can ask you anything and you'll just sing like a bird."

"So what's wrong with that?" asked Harry irritably. "Unless you have something to hide..." he added.

She sneered. "Yes, that's it, something to hide. Not like you, I'm sure you'd love to share everything in your mind. In fact, let's do it right now!" Harry saw her focus shift from his face to somewhere behind his eyes, and he quickly dropped his head.

"You've made your point," he said sullenly.

She dropped the spoon lightly in her bowl and resumed stirring as though nothing had happened.

Hagrid reached over and put an enormous hand on her shoulder. "Tura, yer doin' it again, luv."

She looked at Hagrid in chagrin, and Harry found himself peering back and forth between the two of them, uncertain which one had confounded him the most. "What are you two going on about?" Hagrid gazed at the ceiling as though he'd never noticed it before.

"Hagrid did such a good job with Grawpy, I asked if he could maybe turn me into a human, too," said Ondossi meekly.

Hagrid frowned and poked her arm. "Enough o' that, silly girl. You're just a bit rough aroun' the edges, tha's all." He turned to face Harry. "Grawp was scared an' lonesome too, an' look how good he turned out!"

"Now I'm embarrassed," said Ondossi. She plopped a big scoop of the *akutaq* into a teacup and set it next to Hagrid, then picked up her bowl and started out of the Hall. She paused about halfway to the door and turned around. "Goodnight, gentlemen," she said, glancing at Hagrid almost pleadingly. She turned away after Hagrid winked approvingly, but not before Harry spotted a tear spilling from the corner of her eye.

*Once again, it's Care of Magical Creatures*, thought Harry fondly. If anyone could tame her feral bitterness, it was Hagrid.

After Harry and Hagrid finished dinner, they went up to the Gryffindor common room. Fawkes met them as they came in, gliding down from the boys' dormitories where he had obviously found a place to perch, but neither Ron nor Hermione were anywhere to be found. Hagrid flopped into a couch that groaned ominously, but he chuckled and put his feet up on a heavy table.

"Like I never lef' the place, in some ways," he said cheerfully. "This ol' couch was always me favorite, only one tha' never gave way the whole three years."

Harry smiled too. "It's hard to imagine you anywhere but that cabin, Hagrid."

"World's always changin', Harry. You haven' even seen it since I fixed it back up after the fire. Though it hasn't changed much, I guess, just everythin's so bright and shiny." Fawkes settled onto Hagrid's shoulder and began meticulously preening the groundskeeper's beard, picking up tufts of hair with his beak and polishing them from end to end with his yellow tongue. "Awww, lookatha', Harry, he use ter do that teh Dumbledore." Hagrid lovingly rumbled the small round feathers on Fawkes' head.

"Tura told me I should ask you about Fawkes," said Harry.

"Blimey, Harry, so much has happened, never even got aroun' ter tellin' yeh. You go firs' though, what was it like teh Bond with him?"

Harry described how he and Fawkes had soared over London until the rush of memories had precipitated the fall. "I don't even know what happened, really, I can barely remember it, just that everything in the world seemed wonderful, even though I was on fire and falling to my death. And then I was in the courtyard at Headquarters, without so much as a scratch--or a stitch of clothing, for that matter."

Hagrid chortled. "Yeah, I heard abou' tha' part. But tha's the way it's done, innit? Fawkes chose yeh, Harry, but he hadda give yeh a trial by fire. Not everyone they choose makes it, neither," he continued in a slightly subdued voice. "They're righ' careful about who they pick, but prolly every third one ends up, well, not makin' it."

"What? They die?" Harry gaped at Fawkes in surprise, unable to imagine this gentle bird a killer.

"Not so much dyin', really, though that happens too. But generally they just get sorta wiped clean, yeh see. Kinda like that great flamin' nitwit, wossname, Lockhart. But worse'n him. Can't speak, eat, walk--helpless as a bran' new baby. Gotta start all over from the very beginnin'." Hagrid gazed admiringly at the phoenix. *Typical*, thought Harry, *the more dangerous, the more he loves them*.

"But you come through right as rain, din'cha?" continued Hagrid enthusiastically. "An' now he's yer Familiar! He's part o' yeh, now, Harry, an' yer part o' him. He knows who you know, loves who you love, fears who you fear. He'll do anythin' he can ter protect yeh and help yeh, fer the rest o' yer life." He paused to beam at Fawkes once more. "Mind, you have ter take care o' him too! When his time comes, yeh know, jus' after he burns up, he's righ' near helpless--you hafta see to him til he's strong enough ter fly."

Harry recalled how Dumbledore had tenderly carried a tiny, bald Fawkes in his pocket, after they had confronted Voldemort at the Ministry of Magic. Fawkes had intercepted the *Kedavra* curse that had been meant for Dumbledore. It must have killed him, but of course, he was reborn from his own ashes. What a power Fawkes had, to cheat death repeatedly; Voldemort must be insanely jealous of the phoenix.

Harry was suddenly seared with guilt. "Hagrid! When we Bonded... Fawkes burned up, but I didn't care for him! I just left him out there somewhere... he might have been killed!" At this, Hagrid looked both pleased and abashed, an expression Harry had seen on his rugged face before--and every time some large, usually deadly, and nearly always illegal creature had been involved. "Hagrid?" he asked suspiciously. "What did you do?"

Hagrid's abashed portion expanded to nearly all the space available. "Aw, Harry... yer not mad, are yeh? 'Cause it wasn' really my fault, Tura foun' him in the courtyard there, said his mind was like a ligh'house. You were all wore out, an' I din't have time to explain how to care for him proper--we was headin' off firs' thing for America--an' he din' seem to mind a bit, he knows me, o' course, from Dumbledore..." Hagrid looked as though he was about to panic.

Harry grinned and shook his head. "Don't give it another thought, Hagrid. If you ever passed up a chance to play with any magical beast, I'd know the world was ending."

Fawkes stretched his long neck and warbled joyously, then plunged headfirst into Hagrid's vast beard, disappearing to the wings as if he'd dunked into a barrel of ink. Hagrid squawked and wriggled until the phoenix emerged with a biscuit in his beak. Fawkes cracked it and tossed one piece high in the air, gulping down the first half before catching and crunching up the second.

"Fergot I had that in me pocket," said Hagrid with delight. He watched wistfully as Fawkes spread his wings and launched himself with a lazy beat over to Harry's lap.

Harry felt a renewed sense of awe and wonder as he gazed at Fawkes. "I'm not sure it's a two-way connection, to tell the truth," Harry admitted guiltily. "He seems to understand everything that goes on, but I don't have any idea what he's up to."

"Aw, tha's nothin' ter fret over, Harry. Fawkes's been aroun' fer thousands o' years, he knows the drill. Yeh'll tune inter him soon enough. You saw him an' Dumbledore, they were like two gears inneh same machine."

Harry nodded; he had indeed seen the two of them work together smoothly and intuitively on more than one occasion. He marveled suddenly that it was as though he'd grown an extra limb, like a prehensile tail, that would forever watch his back.

"But he let Snape kill him," Harry said softly, his gaze unfocused.

Hagrid bowed his head sorrowfully, but peered up at Harry. "I dunno, Harry. He must'a been down ter his las' feather when it happened. All in the timin', Harry." Hagrid wiped his eyes fiercely, using the slipcover from the armrest of the couch.

They sat in silence for a while, until the portrait hole swung open and Hermione entered, dragging her feet in exhaustion. "Hullo, all," she said hoarsely, and flopped into a chair.

"You look terrible!" said Harry. "Have you eaten?"

"I did," she reassured them. "I've been helping Madam Pomfrey; they sent up dinner for the whole ward. Everyone said how glad they were to be here instead of St. Mungo's--apparently their food isn't very good."

"How was it down there?" Harry asked.

"It's not bad," she said sincerely. "Once the initial rush was over and we had a few seconds to breathe between crises, we did all right. Two Healers came up from St. Mungo's and took the most serious cases back to London; we got the rest of them tucked in without too much trouble. One fellow from International Cooperation was hit with a timed-delay spell; things had just quieted down when he turned bright purple and began to stretch out like a rubber band, but Madam Pomfrey jumped on it right away. He's almost normal size already."

"Seen Ron?" Harry asked, trying not to sound as worried as he felt.

"Ron went into the shop today," she replied with a concerned frown. "I didn't hear anything about Diagon Alley being attacked, did you?" Harry and Hagrid both shook their heads, and all three of them sighed with relief. "I'd imagine he'll stay with his family tonight--his poor mum must be beside herself."

"Hark," said Harry, "I saw Mr. Weasley at the Ministry--I didn't even think to ask if the family was okay. Though he'd have spoken up if anyone was, you know, hurt or... anything." Harry bit his lower lip, hoping that he was correct--Mr. Weasley could be pretty stoic, especially when times were hard.

As Harry happened to catch Fawkes's eye, he suddenly had a vision of the Weasley family around their big dinner table. It was dim and fleeting, but everyone was there except Bill--and judging by the glow in Fleur's eyes, Bill was the one from whom this vision had come. Harry snapped to and peered expectantly at Fawkes, who quivered and raised all of his non-flight feathers on end, then sneezed. He was so elegant and sleek under normal circumstances, but when he puffed up like that, he looked like a very fuzzy toy that had been forced to endure a trip through the laundry.

As Harry described what he'd just seen, Hagrid nodded thoughtfully. "He must'a forged a little bond there with Bill when he healed him at the weddin'. Makes sense--they don' just give up them tears any ol' time, yeh know."

After a relieved pause, Hermione spoke up again. "I saw Professor Ondossi just before I left the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey gave her something called Dreamless Sleep so she wouldn't wake everyone again tonight. It was odd, too--she fussed and complained, didn't want to take it, but as soon as she saw the bottle, she turned right round and asked if she could keep the whole thing. Did you know she's a Potionist? She offered to help refill the apothecary."

"Yeah, she mentioned it," said Harry, wondering if seal oil would soon become a regular ingredient at the Hospital wing. "But why did she need to stop dreaming, out in the Shrieking Shack?"

"Well, that's just it--she's back in her office." Even though there was no one else present, Hermione leaned forward and lowered her voice confidentially. "Professor McGonagall called her out for moving there; I overheard them on the stairs earlier. She was quite angry, said that she wouldn't have students sneaking off the grounds and saying, 'But I was just visiting the professor'." Hermione gave Harry a pointed look.

"That's not why I took her to the Shack!" said Harry defensively, although it dawned on him that it would have made a convenient excuse for trips to Hogsmeade.

"I know, Harry. But McGonagall didn't; apparently she didn't even know you were involved. Ondossi didn't say a thing, not about you or the nightmare, she just said 'My mistake.' Then she turned her back on McGonagall and just walked away!"

"I bet tha' went over well," said Hagrid.

Hermione screwed up her face in grim agreement. "I thought Professor McGonagall might explode on the spot! But she just gave her The Glare, you know..." Harry and Hagrid both nodded vigorously. If looks could kill, McGonagall would be in Azkaban by now.

A twinge of guilt began to gnaw at Harry. "Ugh. School's not even in session yet and I get her in trouble. Maybe I better go talk to Professor McGonagall."

"I'll take care o' that," said Hagrid firmly. "It's still not yer place to go meddlin' in teachers' affairs."

"But it was my fault. I don't think I even told her it was off the grounds. We went through the tunnel, and you know the windows are all boarded up! She had no idea where she was."

Hagrid's eyes sparkled. "Oh, don' worry about it, Harry. I'll see ter it that you get the blame." He winked.

The conversation turned next to the attack on the Ministry, and Harry described everything he'd seen in the Floo Network Authority and Magical Law Enforcement. He left out the carnage in the Atrium, however, and gave a cursory account of meeting Lupin on Level Nine, only because he wanted to talk about the strange incident with the pear and the archway. "Could it have bounced out, you think? I know it went through, I watched it."

"Yeh sure it was the same pear, Harry?" asked Hagrid.

"There weren't any others, I'd put them all back in the sack. Besides, no one else was there to throw it, even if I did leave one behind."

Hermione leapt onto the issue with both hemispheres of her brain. "Harry, where exactly are you going with this?" she asked with a suspicious glare.

"Going? Nowhere. It happened, I told you about it, that's it."

She narrowed her eyes cynically. "Don't even *try* to sidestep this one. You're thinking about Sirius!"

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I'm supposed to be the mind reader, you know."

She smiled despite herself, but it didn't last long. "Well, spit it out, then, what's your theory?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know. I mean, we still don't know exactly what that thing *is*. It seems like a gateway to death, or the afterlife, but I'm not so sure anymore. I wonder if it's more like the Mirror of Erised. Remember how it showed something different for each person? Because you didn't hear the whispering, did you, Hermione?" She shook her head, and Harry continued "Ginny and Neville weren't quite as drawn to it as me or Luna. Maybe it's a gateway into your own...grief or something, like the Mirror showed you what you wanted most."

Hermione nodded, though Hagrid glanced between them with a deepening frown. "Regardless of what it is," she said pensively, "what do we make of the pear?"

Harry nodded too, enthusiastically. "Well, obviously, it's not a one-way door! The pear went in, the pear came out. Maybe..." He still wasn't ready to describe the laugh he'd heard; he'd grieved so painfully for Sirius, he couldn't let himself hope that his godfather could somehow be alive beyond that archway.

"Harry..." said Hermione, knitting her fingers together anxiously.

Harry waved his hand dismissively and continued. "Maybe the whole point is that only thoughts or feelings or souls, whatever, are supposed to go through that arch, that the pear got thrown back because it's too solid. Which makes me wonder if... maybe we can somehow get Sirius's body back." His voice fell. "We could at least give him a decent burial."

Hermione looked relieved. "Maybe he was too heavy to be... pushed back out. Not like the pear. I do remember seeing the curtain move--maybe it was hurling dust or even air back out of itself."

"Or maybe he could even still be alive," whispered Harry, unable to deny his hope any longer.

Hermione's concerned look snapped back on. "Harry, don't think about it. It's been more than a year... no food, no water... Besides, if Sirius could throw a pear out at Lupin's head, don't you think he'd just step back through the archway?"

"How should I know!" snapped Harry. "Maybe he's trapped, but he had one arm free, for throwing. It could be a million different things! We don't know ONE single fact about that stupid arch, anything is possible!"

To Harry's surprise, Hermione raised her brows in a conciliatory way. "You're right," she finally admitted. "We don't know enough to rule out any possibility. That thing wouldn't be in the Department of Mysteries if it wasn't incredibly powerful. But Harry, you can't let yourself build up false hopes."

Harry bit the inside of his lip. "There's no such thing as 'false' hope, Hermione. Only hope. The false part is expecting everything to work out the way you hope it will."

"All right then," she said after a pause, "what shall we do?"

Hagrid sat up rapidly on the protesting couch. "Oh no yeh don'. I see where this is headin'. This is serious business, this--the Department o' Mysteries! You jus' said it wouldn' even be there if it weren' powerful, an' you two wanner go off an' play with it? Nothin' doin'!" He folded his arms in a conclusive fashion.

"Steady on, Hagrid, we're not going *through* the thing," said Hermione, giving Harry a pointed look to make sure he agreed to that stipulation. "We've already seen that a pear can go in and out of it safely. I doubt there's any harm in trying a few more objects, a rope, perhaps." She glanced upward, thinking. "Or some parchment and a quill. Or a wand..."

Harry's stomach suddenly felt like it was on an elevator that had snapped its cable. "Hermione... I know the perfect thing! The mirror!"

"The mirror," she repeated blankly.

"It was something Sirius gave me, he had a set of them. Sirius told me I could talk to him with it," said Harry in a gravelly voice. "I forgot I even had it, so I never got to try it before he..." He quickly brushed away a tear before it could spill onto his cheek. "I broke it a year ago, when I was upset."

"Do you still have the pieces?"

"I don't know but I think so, they're probably still in my trunk, I never really, erm, cleaned it out."

They were indeed there, at the bottom of the trunk in a layer of debris that was taking on an archaeological quality. Hermione picked the shards up carefully and put them in Harry's palm, then shook all the loose dust and silt in the trunk on top of the pile. "I hope that's all of it," she said. "You do the repair, Harry--you broke it, so if you fix it, maybe that will help restore the charm. But it may not work, even if it can come back together."

Harry raised his wand. "*Reparo*," he said, with the proper flourish. The mirror reassembled in his hand, with only a few polygonal holes (with very sharp edges) here and there, and the silver a bit thin in spots.

Hermione smiled broadly. "Good work! Now where's the other one?"

Harry's shoulders sagged. "I haven't the foggiest idea."

"And it's a good thing, too!" said Hagrid, who had required more time to wriggle his way up the narrow stone staircase to the dormitory. "You two got no business performin' experiments with summat yeh know nothin' about!"

This was Hermione's territory, and Harry willingly let her run wild. "First of all," she said, her finger pointing firmly at Hagrid's face (calling to mind a mouse admonishing an elephant), "the ONLY way to learn about *anything* is through experimentation. Nothing gets discovered until it gets explored! Secondly, the Ministry kept that thing out in the middle of a big room, not encased in glass like the brains or the Time Loop. If it was inherently dangerous just to go near, it wouldn't be sitting out in the open without so much as a rail around it. Finally," she rallied up with indignation, "you can bet your pension that the Department of Mysteries has been experimenting with it, most likely to exploit it, or even develop it into a weapon! So if you think I'm going to let those ninnies give it the only go, well think again! And *you*," she said, turning to Harry, "you get to work on finding the other mirror!"

Hagrid looked for a moment as though he wished he had a large flyswatter, but he finally sighed with a noisy puff. Shaking his head, he rumbled, "An' ter think the both of yeh use' ter be so sweet..."

The next few weeks passed so quickly, Harry barely kept track of the time. Ron or Hermione, sometimes both, kept him company in the evenings; it was actually quite pleasant to spend the long summer twilight at Hogwarts. Lupin visited Harry nearly every night to check in on the lessons and bring news. "They've almost cleaned out the Ministry. What a mess," he'd sighed one week after the attacks. "It had to be done by hand, there were all sorts of little hexes hidden in the rubble that were set to go off under a Vanishing or Scouring. There was some talk about just sealing off the Atrium entirely, turn it into a tomb, but those poor blokes in the Floo Network needed the fireplaces."

"They've been going round the clock, they're still not sure exactly what happened to it. In some spots, it ended up being easier to just abandon the old spell infrastructure and build it up from scratch! That network's been accumulating for 800 years, since chimneys were first built in Britain--you can imagine what a tangled mess it's become!"

Lupin learned that the Ministries (or their local equivalents) in Berlin, Stockholm and Rome were damaged at least as badly as London's, but the Swiss Ministry in Zurich had been nearly unscathed. "We could do with a leaf or two from their book on self-defense. They were as unprepared for the surprise attack as anyone, but they already had a system in place to defend themselves. It was just a matter of setting it in motion. Sensible people, the Swiss. I hear their trains are never late, either."

When Harry asked if a new Minister of Magic had been appointed, Lupin said nothing at first, just raised his brows and shook his head. "Not for lack of trying, Harry, but suddenly no one wants it. Even the greediest ones that have been after it for years. I know how they feel. Who'd sign up just to be the next target, on top of having to put the entire ministry back together? I wish Dumbledore were here," he finally sighed miserably.

Harry patted his friend on the shoulder. "Me too. But we'll manage somehow."

Indeed, the Order was making progress with the giants at a quick pace. Voldemort's attacks on the Wizard governments had not involved giants, only other wizards, so it had proved the perfect time for the Order to send envoys to all the clans. Hagrid and Madame Maxime had numerous disadvantages when they had attempted diplomatic efforts in the past; they were outnumbered, outsized, and had little to offer but Dumbledore's name and a few small gifts. The Sasquatch giants, however, were making quite an impression on the bedraggled European giants.

"You should see Grawp in the field," Lupin said proudly in his chair before the fire. "Hagrid's done an incredible thing, teaching him English--he's the best translator we have. He said to tell you hello, 'Hermy,' by the way," he added with a wink. Hermione rolled her eyes, but she looked pleased nonetheless. "They've relocated over twenty giants already; it's always whole families at once, you know, they don't dare leave anyone behind."

"How do you move a giant across the sea?" asked Harry.

Lupin ducked his head with a guilty grin. "Well, we *planned* to use Apparition, but, well, with the Ministries down, it seemed a lot simpler to just make Portkeys. Besides, the American laws governing Portkeys aren't the same, and the Sasquatch giants are sort of like diplomats..."

Harry and Hermione both laughed. "I'm convinced," said Harry. "No need to explain it to me!"

Lupin explained that the newcomers were being taken to the most remote mountain ranges in the far north of the continent. "They can live alone just like they did at home, or if they choose, they can migrate back down to the warrens further south. I think the younger ones are already looking forward to this whole 'Bigfoot' business. Apparently the sport's as popular as Quidditch over there, even the wizards like to gamble on the championships."

"I hope we still have a Care of Magical Creatures professor when all this is over!" said Hermione.

Lupin laughed. "I just hope he leaves his spare Galleons at home when he goes on these trips."

Harry spent his days in Ondossi's office, in the slow process of learning Occlumency. Harry found himself grudgingly acknowledging that Snape just might have been genuinely trying to teach him, back in his fifth year. It was not a quick or easy process, despite working at it all day long.

"Your magic naturally wants to explore, acquire knowledge and power. Your intellect, however, can't process a hundred different minds at once. So you have to be disciplined, bring your magic under your control, choose when to use it and how far to go."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Right, yes, discipline, control... that's all most inspirational, but what does it *mean*? Which muscle do I flex?"

She snorted. "Why am I totally unsurprised that self-discipline is a mystery to you? Never mind," she chastised, with a dismissive wave. "Maybe we're going about this the wrong way. Let me think. I *had* to learn, because the alternative was to go stark raving nuts. Talk about motivation! Maybe that's what you lack, hotshot. A sense of how desperately you need to do this." She put her hand in her chin and stared at him thoughtfully.

Harry suddenly broke out in goosebumps from head to toe. "What exactly are you plotting over there?" he said uneasily.

She grinned malignantly and beckoned with her fingertips, and Harry felt his mind break open like an egg.

Images swam before and through him, orderless and disjointed. As with Fawkes, he could do nothing to control the process, he was forced into the role of passive observer. But Fawkes had drawn him into a flowing stream of knowledge as an introduction to his new Familiar, while Tura was clearly determined to make him as miserable as possible.

The tunnels below the Northport Institute of Magical Studies. Cold cement and hot steel, both hard and unforgiving. A pile of rags to sleep on; Harry woke up on a hundred different "mornings" within a minute, hungry and aching each time. More images and thoughts began to add to Tura's. Harry realized that she was sending him through her own memories of the time before she'd learned Occlumency, when her mind was constantly bombarded by the thoughts of others. It was a mad cacophony of disorienting visions. People passing one another in the same hallway, transmitting their view from both directions. One person taking a chair as another stood up, the conflicting sensory data giving him nausea. Love, hate, anger, forgiveness, joy, sorrow, even the mundane boredom from the History of Magic class, all winding through him at once. It was enough to drive him mad.

"Yes," said Ondossi. Harry had fallen to the floor at some point, but she was leaning over in her chair to address him. "You understand, I'm not using either Legilimency or Occlumency? Well, a tiny bit, just enough to steer you into what I want you to see. But you're sending your magic into my mind Harry. And you know what? I'm not going to help you out anymore. Whether it takes a minute or an hour or even a day, you're going to have to withdraw from my mind on your own."

Harry only had time to raise his hand in protest before he fell off the cliff of reality again.

So that was what a rat tasted like. For heaven's sake, she didn't even skin them?! Harry registered the question but apparently it only served to show Tura that he wasn't fully immersed yet. He felt a hint of her approval, followed immediately by a slam of sensation that turned her memories into his with such realism that his identity was obliterated, forgotten.

It was bitterly cold, but Harry was clothed snugly in furs, and too excited to care. This was her first trip to the *uiniq* or "open lead," the end of the ice shelf that extended from the land. This was where icebergs were born, where seals and whales could surface for air--the northernmost point on Earth on which people could stand on "solid ground," though that ground was merely water, frozen for the moment. Warmth, wind, and currents could easily change that at any time, shearing off whole sections of ice that would leave the hunters stranded at sea.

In all but the most recent times, girls did not accompany the hunters to the *uiniq*, but neither did the ancient hunters use snowmachines to haul their gear across the ice. A team of dogs would have been much more authentic and silent, but they would also be slower, and though Harry hated to admit it, she preferred the smell of burning gasoline to unwashed dogs (particularly the end of the dogs nearest to the sled). Outsiders had brought both the snowmachines and the attitudes that had made it possible for her to be here, now, on a "mostly" traditional hunt. The fact that she had a dead-on aim with her harpoon had certainly helped.

The men often used guns, but Harry liked the harpoon. A gun could kill from far away, but a harpoon demanded skill, in order to get close enough to the animal to be in range. Many hunters would dress in white fur and attempt to sneak up on the seal under camouflage, but Harry preferred to approach openly by imitating another seal. It was another thing she did instinctively well; only years later would she realize that this was the earliest sign of her Legilimency, that she could read and soothe a seal into accepting her presence, despite the striker she was carrying.

It was a painful thing, though, to kill this seal, for even though the meat was a necessity, she had been in the animal's mind. It never knew what hit it, as they say, but it also had no wish to die; it was a beautiful, simple creature and the guilt Harry felt when its life suddenly broke drove her nearly to tears. Harry danced after the carcass had been hauled back to the camp on the stable ice, much longer than the normally prescribed time. Every footfall was an apology, every clap a word of thanks to the mother seal for the life of her baby. The dance lasted for hours, until Harry's limbs were shaking and rubbery, too painful for the grief of the seal to register.

*I thought that would bore you enough to push out,* came Ondossi's voice. *No problem. I've got worse, boy.*

Harry had been out tending someone's garden; she was much older now and it was mid-summer. She was uneasy; something bad had happened, and she'd spent most of the day keeping others' fear and dread out of her mind. It wasn't difficult, just tiring, and with the midnight sun shining, it was already hard to sleep--having to keep her dreams guarded from others' anxieties would make it even worse. Harry pushed open the door to her little shed, irritably noting that the tricky hinge had come loose again; she had to wrestle it shut, funny, she was sure it wasn't like that this morning--

Harry spun around in horror, having felt his presence before seeing the glowing red eyes in the shadows of the cabin.

"Do you know who I am?" Voldemort asked.

"I know." Hatred saturated her voice. He was sitting on her bed, *her bed*. It was bad enough that he would let himself into her home, but for him to settle right in as though he *belonged* was an insult beyond measure.

"You were only a baby the last time I saw you," said Voldemort quite casually. "You're the very image of your mother, you know." He stood up slowly; the cabin was so small there was no need to take even a single step in order for his long white fingers to reach her cheek, a gesture filled with menace, not tenderness. "But you have your father's eyes."

Harry was still holding the steel gardening trowel when she struck his icy hand away, but she didn't have enough leverage to break any bones. "How dare you?" Harry said,



too angry to come up with something more original.

Voldemort pulled his hand in close to his chest briefly, and though his eyes flared with affront, his voice was calm when he spoke again. "You are the Legilimagus of this generation, 'Miss Ondossi.' I suspected as much the last time I came through this miserable part of the world. When you were far too young to remember."

"Oh, I remember," Harry said venomously. "I can unlock memories that you wouldn't expect. Perhaps I should demonstrate."

He laughed mirthlessly. "You threaten me, young lady? Perhaps I should kill you." Harry felt a pang of alarm; Voldemort did have his wand in hand. But she knew better; if he had meant her to die, this conversation would never have begun.

"You won't," Harry said dismissively. "I own something of great value. You're here to persuade, not murder."

Voldemort's inhuman face did not express many emotions, but he sighed in what was obviously annoyance. "Was that insight, my dear, or did you simply steal that knowledge from my mind?"

"Steal?" Harry said mockingly. "You're so transparent, I don't need to bother 'stealing.' Tell me what you want, *old man*, or I will 'steal it', just to get this over with."

"I don't think you will," said Voldemort shrewdly. "I think you'd do anything to avoid penetrating my unwilling mind. You understand that you can no more drive me mad than you could kill me." Voldemort began to smile, such as it was, a contemptuous facsimile of amusement.

Harry took a step backward, her heart beginning to race. "I understand, Riddle, that you will die seven painful deaths before you're finished, and for that I am absolutely delighted."

Voldemort struck Harry across the mouth with his fist. "You are trying my patience, Tura," he said, his eyes flaring like a coal before a bellows.

Stars flickered before Harry's eyes, but she held her ground. "You don't scare me, fool. Do you know every time you put your hand on me, you surrender more of your mind?" She turned her back on him and knelt beside her water bucket, rinsing the blood from her lip with a soft rag. When she regarded him again, he looked a little intimidated; apparently he didn't know that physical contact was as good as an invitation into his thoughts. "I know you don't dare kill me, or even torture me," Harry continued. "I'm too valuable to you alive. And I could make your little quest so easy, couldn't I? That's the doom of the Legilimagi, always being sought out by weak men who want a quick road to power. Pathetic!"

"We seem to have reached detente, then," said Voldemort in a low, silken voice. "Our weapons are too powerful to use against one another. Perhaps, dear girl, we can reach a compromise."

"Compromise?" sputtered Harry. "What the Sam Hill can you offer me for a compromise?"

Voldemort peered deeply at her. "How about the life of your 'angel'?"

Harry felt like her entire belly had just flipped inside out. "You're bluffing."

Voldemort chuckled indulgently. "In part, my love, only in part. I've learned that Dumbledore sent someone to you, Tura. I can learn more, if I put in the effort. I have historically concentrated on the UK, but I could easily turn my attention to Northport. There are only so many people I would have to question before someone recalls something." Voldemort's eyes glowed maliciously. "Or better yet, even you must drop your guard sometime."

Suddenly, Harry really needed to throw up. "What do you want, Tom?" she asked in a shaking whisper.

"I want many things, Tura. For now, I would settle for a truce."

"Truce? What are you talking about?" Harry turned back to the water bucket as a pretense to sit down; the cold rag helped ease her nausea and panic.

"One never knows what the future holds, Tura. You may yet decide to support me. That alone is worth preserving your life. But I won't have you working against me, throwing your lot in with Dumbledore. It's quite simple, really. I will leave you alone, you will leave me alone. You surrender nothing of value to Dumbledore, and I will continue in ignorant bliss of this man you love. We shall share a peaceful coexistence."

Harry put the rag on the back of her neck. "I see. As an alternative to mutual destruction. Very black-and-white, Tom."

"And you will *stop using that name*," Voldemort's voice turned into a hiss.

She stood again, unsteadily, but Harry knew she needed to look Voldemort in the eye. "All right, *Lord Voldemort*," Harry said with a sneer, "I could accept those terms. But tell me, why should I believe for one second that you intend to keep your end of the deal? You're not exactly known as a man of your word."

He smirked. "Shall we make an Unbreakable Vow?"

Harry scoffed. "Oh, that's nice. I can only make one Unbreakable Vow, while you would have to make what, seven? I think a pinkie-swear would bind you better than that."

Voldemort nodded. "The very nature of detente is one of guarded trust, is it not? Or perhaps guarded distrust would be a better description. With so much at stake, each of us would have to act in good faith, and expect the other not to be fool enough to break the standoff."

Harry folded her arms. She didn't trust Voldemort for an instant, but now that he had discovered her weak spot, she was desperate to protect it. Harry knew this was precisely the way Voldemort wanted it, too, but there didn't seem to be any way around it at the moment.

Harry steeled herself and lay down her terms in a cold, stern voice. "You will leave not so much as a token Death Eater in Northport. I know you have one in Hogwarts, but Albus isn't stupid enough to reveal my secrets to that one. You will make sure your little minions know nothing of me, or our connection; when they ask about the Legilimagus, you will tell them you're courting me personally and they are to give me a wide berth. I'll be checking them, listening for rumors. If I hear even a hint that you're investigating--"

"Do not complete that threat, Tura," Voldemort interrupted in a bored voice. "I will make it as you have asked. I care not what you or your paramour do, as long as you are no threat to me. You will keep your silence and you will not engage me or my people with your mind. You go on enjoying your poverty, your frostbite, your starvation; you've carved out a lovely little niche for yourself here. Perhaps someday you'll discover that this 'good man' of yours only tolerates your efforts to live as an animal in order to avail of your power. I'm sure he says whatever he must in order to convince you of his *love*." Only Voldemort could say that word with such spite.

He stepped directly in front of Harry. "And you, naive and lovestruck, undoubtedly fall for every ploy. When you understand how badly he's deceived you, you may welcome a chance to lend your power to an *honest* man." Voldemort put his chill hands on Harry's shoulders, his long white thumbs at the base of her throat. "I have no need to lie to you, Tura; to delude you with flattery and vacant promises. You know I want your power, and I know you must give it to me willingly. But I too have power, dear girl; I can give you everything you lack, just as you can complete me."

Harry realized in horror that Voldemort's voice had become soft and seductive, and he was leaning in close, much too close. There was nowhere to go; her back was against the wall already, and he was blocking the door.

"I will make you a queen, child, when you surrender yourself." And suddenly there was no distance between them, no air to breathe, and Harry felt Voldemort's thin,

serpentine lips on her own, a thin, forked tongue flicking between them--

--Harry leapt to his feet in Ondossi's dark office, spitting and clawing at invisible hands upon his throat.

"I thought that one might get you," Tura said in a strained tone.

Harry groaned miserably and covered his throbbing forehead; his scar felt as though it would split his skull in two.

## 13: Aye, of N.E.W.T.

*Chapter 13 of 50*

The term starts at last at Hogwarts, with plenty of surprises to get things rolling. New friends are met, old friends are rediscovered. The Sorting Hat makes a nice summary of current events.



September First has been a holiday in Hogsmeade for 700 years, with its own traditions that have evolved through the times. In this particular era, house elves from the castle knock politely on every door in town, then carry off a years' worth of frozen carcasses and leftover meat to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid appears after lunchtime to harness thestrals onto dozens of coaches, which, to most observers, appears to be a long, expertly-performed pantomime. Children climb the hills in the late afternoon as high as they dare, hoping to catch sight of the Hogwarts Express in the distance before the sun sets.

Harry gazed through the window of the common room in Gryffindor Tower when he heard the familiar whistle. "I suppose we'd better go get dressed," he mumbled to Ron.

"It'll be a while yet," Ron said. "Feel like a round of Exploding Snap?"

Harry wasn't in the mood. Truth be told, he wasn't in the mood for the feast either, for any of it, but he'd promised McGonagall he'd show. He would have made Rufus Scrimgeour swallow his broom and take Stan Shunpike for a ride around London before Harry would be a poster boy for the Ministry, but Hogwarts was another matter.

After the attack on the Ministry, no one felt safe anywhere in the country. Nearly every Wizard family in the UK had begged to send children to Hogwarts that fall. Even teens with no formal education in Sorcery had applied. Professor McGonagall had taken them all, creating a logistical nightmare for the faculty. Sixteen-year-olds who had never brewed a single potion, fourteen-year-olds who had never been out from under direct parental supervision, all in addition to the regular crop of eleven-year-olds who had never spent more than a night or two away from Mummy and Daddy. McGonagall added four extra prefects to each House, but Harry had bowed out when she asked him. He knew that if his hour came, it would be the worst possible time for her to be short a prefect.

Academics were in chaos as well. Introductory courses for older students had to be developed in every subject, but fortunately, those would concern themselves mainly with topics on self-protection. Only Professor Binns steadfastly insisted on teaching his regular curriculum, which was probably just as well; a good nap is, after all, a good nap. Professor Ondossi had a task no one envied; she would be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts from dawn to dusk every day but Saturday. Most of the former Dumbledore's Army had volunteered as tutors, and Harry had joined in this time. He felt that anything he could do to help people protect themselves was worth the effort.

"Do you suppose they're going to Sort them this year?" said Ron, putting away his cards.

Harry pursed his lips. "Beats me. Who'd want to be sorted into Slytherin, eh? Though I suppose all the Junior Death Eaters won't be back this fall."

Ron nodded with a wry grin. "They could turn it into a whole new House. A kinder, gentler sort of Slytherin."

"Oh, give it a rest," said Hermione. "They may be selfish, but they're not all killers. Pansy Parkinson is coming back; she sent me an owl this summer."

"You're kidding!" said Ron and Harry at the same time. Ron added, "PLEASE tell me you checked it for jinxes before you opened it."

"Of course I did. But it was a very touching letter. She was devastated by what Malfoy did; she thought he was just showing off with all the 'Dark Lord' business."

"Hermione," said Ron incredulously, "every Death Eater dishes out that tripe when they get caught--'I never knew,' 'I thought he was only kidding,' 'I was under the Imperius Curse,' la de da, not my fault."

"You know," snapped Hermione, "sometimes people really do get deceived, or they turn a blind eye because they're in love. You don't know anything about her, Ron, maybe you ought to *find out* instead of *assuming*."

"So much judgement," mumbled Harry, and they both looked at him questioningly, but he said nothing more.

Harry sat alone at the Gryffindor table as students began to pour into the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione were off helping corral the new students with the rest of the prefects. Harry didn't want to look at the head table, at the gold chair that should have been Dumbledore's, where Professor McGonagall now sat. Harry realized with a start that she was usually out lining up the first years at this point in time; all the comfortable rituals he had come to know at Hogwarts were changing.

Hagrid himself led in the column of new students, which was considerably longer than usual, and kept getting taller as it progressed. He attempted to line them up before the head table, but there were simply too many. Harry reckoned it must have been "standing room only" on the train. When Hagrid finally managed to arrange the "first years" into two cramped rows, he stepped to the end of the table with arms spread wide, and solemnly said, "Headmaster, I present the new students at Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall gave him a formal nod, then looked up expectantly. Hagrid smiled broadly, still indicating the group of students with his hands. McGonagall flattened her lips pointedly and jerked her eyebrows toward the center of the group. When Hagrid merely continued to grin, she tried tossing her head slightly, then harder, finally resorting to a sharp whisper, "The Hat!" Hagrid immediately gulped and brought out the traditional stool to the front of the group, and set the Sorting Hat upon it.

Ron and Harry exchanged a knowing glance. The Hat sat silently for a very long time, until Harry anxiously began to wonder if Hagrid had accidentally knocked it out with his powerful grip. It finally came to life and sung a solemn dirge:

*By sorrow is this grand occasion bound,*

*We gather here still mourning for the slain.*

*A traitor walks the earth, while underground*

*The noble man whom he betrayed remains.*

*This year will see a prophecy fulfilled.*

*Upon his task the Chosen shall embark.*

*I only know that life's blood will be spilled*

*But whether good or evil, light or dark,*

*Cannot be known until the deed is done.*

*But certain 'tis, that one of two will fall.*

*If Dark succumbs, then broken will be One,*

*If Light dies, then accursed are we all.*

*For thirty-five score years now, my decree*

*Has sent the students to the House they sought.*

*On their first night, division did they see.*

*Divided did they live, divided taught.*

*To reinforce and strengthen was the goal.*

*Alas, behind closed doors, prejudice bred.*

*Like-minded friends all swimming in one shoal,*

*Came to distrust the others. Lies I've fed,*

*Foundations shattered, made rivalries last.*

*This lie must end! All persons must unite,*

*Must lay aside divisions of times past,*

*Collect their will and courage for the fight.*

*I was brought forth tonight for my decree*

*To rend this group along ideals enshrined.*

***Aut se jungite aut morimini***

*To sort you, I respectfully decline.*

The silence that followed this song was both long and complete; were it not for the candles illuminating row after row of stunned faces, a passerby outside the doors would have thought the Great Hall was empty. Harry didn't dare take his eyes off the hat, for he knew people were staring at him from every direction.

The entire staff table had turned pale, except for one. Professor Ondossi studied the Hat for a moment, then came around the table and poked it roughly several times. It remained silent. She picked it up and, after examining the brim and looking inside, put it on her head. "Slytherin," it whispered immediately, the sound carrying through the entire Hall. She set it back down, petting it as though it were a living creature.

"It's not hexed or confunded," she said matter-of-factly. "It's fine. But it's quite firm about its decision."

Only Hagrid had both the presence of mind and absence of prudence to point out, "But it jus' sorted you, Professor." Ondossi responded only by winking at Hagrid with a sly grin.

Harry leaned onto his elbow, resting his chin in his hand and shaking his head cynically. The Hat obviously had to admit that anyone who would strike a deal with Voldemort and seal it with a kiss obviously belonged in Slytherin.

After a stunned pause, Professor McGonagall stood to address the crowd of bewildered first years. "It seems that our traditional welcome will not be performed this evening," she said. "You would normally have been each assigned to one of the four Houses tonight, but our Sorting Hat clearly believes that distinguishing between Houses is harmful in the... present climate."

"I ask all students present to consider the meaning of this gesture. You have become accustomed to neighbors with whom you have much in common. For the first time, you will be exposed to others in your common rooms that will be distinctly different from you, in their opinions, skills, and values. Uncomfortable confrontations will arise, in which both parties will feel that they simply cannot see eye-to-eye; they may find no ground on which to settle the matter."

"In the past, the Sorting has sheltered each of you from the difficult process of tolerating different beliefs. This is a process that requires maturity. It requires you to assume the best intentions of your fellow students, to accept that a word or act that you perceive as 'wrong' might mean something harmless to someone else, and therefore you cannot automatically take offense to such things. It requires you to be honest, and generous, to ask difficult questions, and accept answers without judgement."

"These are tasks which, frankly, many adults have never mastered. One reason for the Sorting is that these tasks were considered too burdensome for children. Perhaps we've had it backwards: that it is difficult for adults because we did not learn the process of tolerance when we were young."

"I do not want the Unsorted students to feel isolated within the established Houses. Tonight we shall make a first step toward that end, and establish a new tradition. I ask all of you to stand now, and step back from your House tables."

There was a tiny delay before benches began to scrape noisily on the flagstone floor and robes began to rustle. Harry and Ron exchanged a suspicious look before reluctantly getting to their feet, but Hermione had been one of the first to stand. As the students rose, Professor McGonagall huddled with Professor Flitwick in an intense discussion. The two of them raised their wands and traced them in an interwoven pattern.

The long tables snapped apart into squares; benches became chairs; students stepped back toward walls and aisles as the furniture and flatware arranged themselves into sets of twelve. The gold chargers turned color, so that each table bore twin processions of red, yellow, white, blue, green, and white place settings. The corners of the tables snapped off and Vanished, leaving four long edges and four short, then a second snap removed a section of each long edge. This turned the square tables into dodecahedra, with twelve equal sides. With a final flourish by Professor Flitwick, the chairs took on colors to match their place settings, and all became still again.

"From this night on," said McGonagall, "dining will be an opportunity to practice getting along. I ask each of you to find a new seat, according to your House colors; the white settings are for new students." She gazed sternly down at the group, lest anyone protest this new arrangement. The entire student body glanced nervously at one another, then (to no one's surprise), Luna Lovegood trotted blithely from the main door all the way down the center of the room, and plopped contentedly into a blue chair.

"Come on, Ron," said Hermione, dragging him by the hand to the next table and leaving him there. She turned back to give Harry an encouraging grin, then found a spot further away. The other prefects began following her lead. Harry clapped Neville and Seamus on the shoulders and the two of them nodded wordlessly and moved to separate tables, as did Parvati, Lavender, and other older students. The younger ones scattered quickly, once they realized they'd better hustle if they wanted to sit in pairs together. Ginny Weasley took the remaining red chair at Harry's table.

When everyone had found a seat, Professor McGonagall's glowing smile warmed the whole room. "Thank you," she said with such heartfelt sincerity it was almost painful to hear it. "I think we can uphold one tradition, that is, to save my opening speech until after the Feast." With those words, the tables became splendidly laden with food. Harry picked up a goblet of pumpkin juice and tipped the rim in a little salute to Ginny. She returned the gesture and they drank a silent toast.

Although conversations finally began to pick up at other tables, not much was said at Harry's. The Sorting Hat's song pretty much eliminated what little appetite he'd had, but he ate mechanically, rather than answer the questions that he knew were burning, unsaid, all around him. It was bad enough that he could hear snatches from the other tables, mutters of "Chosen," "prophecy" and "broken will be One." Why the Hat had felt compelled to bring all that up was beyond Harry; he wished it had kept its big yap shut.

When the tables had magically cleared, Professor McGonagall stood up once more. "There is much I need to tell you, though I don't wish to keep you from your beds too long."

"The forest on the Hogwarts grounds is forbidden to all students. There is to be no leaving the castle after dark, and no leaving the grounds at any time without the express permission of a member of the faculty. In years past, we have permitted occasional excursions to Hogsmeade, but I regret to announce--" a collective groan began to arise in the room before she could even complete the sentence "--that such trips are suspended until further notice. This is for your safety, young ladies and gentlemen; please do not attempt to circumvent this rule *in any way*."

"Quidditch trials will be held in three weeks. Anyone wishing to play should speak to Madame Hooch. We will continue to have House teams, though the captains will be required to invite at least one Unsorted player per team."

"As the Headmaster of Hogwarts, it is unfitting that I should remain Head of Gryffindor House." This was unexpected, and produced a number of gasps around the Hall. She acknowledged them with a nod and continued. "I have invited Professor Rubeus Hagrid to take over that responsibility." Harry, Ron, and Hermione leapt to their feet with wild applause, and though many of the other Gryffindors were not nearly as thrilled, they followed suit. Hagrid beamed; even his enormous beard couldn't hide the flush in his cheeks.

When the clapping had settled, McGonagall said, "We also need a new Head of Slytherin House." That darkened the mood considerably; Harry looked in turn at Ron and Hermione, each of them grim-faced from the reminder of Snape's foul deed. *A traitor walks the earth*, Harry recalled, rolling his wand through his fingertips under the table. "Professor Horace Slughorn who came out of retirement to teach, has agreed to fill this position as well." Polite applause filled the room, though some (undoubtedly hoping to curry favor with the well-connected Slughorn) displayed considerable enthusiasm.

It took hours to "sort" all the new students into dormitories, however, and as prefects, Hermione and Ron were deeply involved in that chore. Harry ended up napping on his four-poster, after practically sprinting up to the Tower when the Feast ended. Ron finally woke him up, bumping into the dormitory and looking frazzled. "Good grief, Harry, I had no idea the Hat had such a hard job. Getting the right number of girls, boys, right ages, all matched up for roommates. And of course Slytherin House is like a Swiss cheese, people missing from every year... You don't care, do you, mate?" Harry shook his head firmly. "Fine then. Just give me five minutes to catch my breath, I'll be right down."

"Well, I guess the word's out now," said Hermione brightly, when Harry joined her at the window, slinking unobtrusively into a chair. There weren't many people left in the common room by then; most had gone upstairs to unpack or meet any new roommates. Nonetheless, he barely had time to wrinkle his nose at Hermione before all other conversations in the room ceased and all eyes were upon him. She scowled and, standing up, said loudly, "You're welcome to join us if there's something on your mind." Several more students were inspired to retreat upstairs while others turned away awkwardly, but Neville Longbottom and Ginny took her up on the offer.

"So," said Harry, "what do you think? 'Broken will be one?' Sounds great, eh?"

"Some would say Bill's broken, you know," said Ginny pointedly.

"And Lupin, for that matter," said Hermione. "I'm not too worried about that part, Harry, I don't think even you expect to get through a full scale battle with Voldemort unscathed. That penultimate line, though, that was pretty frightening. I don't think the Hat could have been more direct, do you?"

Ron had ambled over to the group by then. "Well, other than the fact it used a language no one speaks, I'd have to agree."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That was Latin, Ron. Like, oh, nearly every spell we've ever cast? Oh, never mind, I'm not even going to ask if you bothered to read the language supplements in History of Magic. It said, 'Either join yourselves together or die.' Is that clearer?"

"Crystal," said Ron, in a strained voice. Everyone shifted in their chairs as that settled in.

Harry weighed that a moment. "You know, it's almost contradicting itself. If 'the One' has to finish Voldemort, then what difference does it make if people work together?"

Hermione stared at him. "I think maybe that comes, um, if you don't, uh..."

Harry sunk into his chair. "Oh. Yeah. If I die trying." He ran his hands through his hair and tried to stretch his neck.

Ron took Harry's shoulders and gave them a firm shake. "Never happen. You've cleaned up the floor with him every time!"

Harry looked plaintively up at Ron's encouraging smile, not bothering to point out that he'd also had help at every single encounter. The one time he'd faced Voldemort alone, back in the graveyard, he got away only because of a freak malfunction of their wands--and Voldemort wouldn't make that mistake again, either. One on one, even the Sorting Hat couldn't tell who was truly the stronger.

"*This year will see a prophecy fulfilled*" Harry recalled. "I guess we'll all find out soon enough."

The next two days were adventurous, to say the least. With twice as many new students as usual, there were twice as many incidents of people getting lost, arriving late for class or meals, or simply getting trapped by the moving staircases (which apparently assumed that climbers over a certain height or weight were returning students who ought to know their way around). There were times when every level of the marble stairs had trapped at least one student on a balcony or dead-end hall, leaving them calling for help like so many mountain sheep bleating on a cliff face.

Hermione had naturally enrolled in every course she could possibly take, and therefore had little time off during the day. Harry and Ron, however, had determinedly taken the most slothful path they could get away with, which was essentially the same schedule as their sixth year: Charms, Herbology, Potions, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Hagrid had invited them to look in on his Care of Magical Creatures classes now and again, and neither could think of a graceful way to decline the offer. They resolved to lend Hagrid some moral support at least once a month, since his seventh year classes (woefully small) were all right after lunch, and they'd probably just waste that time loafing in the common room anyway. Each of them also had one class period assigned to assist with Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Wednesday morning began with double Defense Against the Dark Arts with the Ravenclaws. The classroom windows had been completely covered and two small lamps burned in the front corners. Ron gave Harry a skeptical look; he was clearly envisioning Professor Trelawney's suffocating red classroom. "What is this," said an unidentifiable student, "Defense Against the Dark?"

Ondossi entered the room just as the bell rang, skirting the edges of the room with her eyes closed, guiding her way with one hand on the wall until the door clicked shut. Once the little bit of reflected sunlight from the hall had been banished, she stepped smartly to the front of the room.

"Good morning," she said to the class. "First off: no complaining about the darkness. This is an entirely practical class, and attacks in the dark are commonplace. And you won't be doing any reading in here anyway. Second: for obvious reasons, I'm emphasizing defenses against a direct assault, from human and non-human opponents. Those who have been in the Duelling Club have done a bit of this already. Please help one another; a little practice could make the difference between life and death. Quite possibly your own, even. Finally, I'm better at one-on-one than group instruction, so this is how class will be run: I do a demonstration, you pair off and practice, I walk around and help your form. Everyone got that?" She stopped abruptly and glared around the room, and when no one spoke up, she nodded.

"Good. Lesson number one: Your first line of defense is to avoid the fight. Always, always, *always* walk out of the line of fire if you can. By this I mean, if you see an aggressive situation arising, do your best to sidestep it. Cross the street; hide; run; Apparate. The surest way to come out without a scratch is not to fight in the first place."

She paused and peered around the room, giving Harry a little wink when she came to him. "Some of you think that I've just described cowardice. Not true! If you're alone and a gang of enemies attacks you, or even just one against whom you are totally outmatched, there's nothing cowardly about escaping. In fact, it would be stupid to remain and fight in those situations. I want all of you to think about that, and think hard. One of the Dark Lord's tactics is to isolate his victims so they'll go down easily. He knows that noble people want to act courageous. He counts on you to confuse foolishness for courage--that you *won't* run away even if you *can* run. You must remember that if flight is an option, take it!"

A dissenting grumble began to form, but she raised a hand for silence. "That was lesson number one, the most important, and the one few people bother to teach. Running away, if you can, may save your life. You may not think of flight as a weapon, but you must make it part of your arsenal."

She wrinkled her nose with a fiendish grin and raised her wand like a baton before an orchestra. "Now we can spend the rest of the year learning what to do when fleeing is NOT an option." Hoots and applause broke out around the classroom. "Yeah, yeah," she said, rolling her eyes but still grinning, "I figured as much. I tell you how to save your life and you grumble, but I talk about mixing it up and it's 'Woohoo!' There's something fundamentally *human* about that."

She paused and peered at the class thoughtfully a moment. Harry felt an eerie sensation as though one of the castle's ghosts had walked through him, just as he caught her eye. He knew she was using Legilimency on everyone in the room, but no one else seemed to notice. *I've got to find out how she does that*, he thought to himself.

"Well, let's start with the Patronus charm. Hermione Granger, front and center!" Hermione glanced at Harry and Ron with a hint of self-consciousness, then headed to the front of the class. "Would you be so kind?" said Ondossi.

Hermione took a deep breath and made her Patronus, which drew several admiring "ooh's" from the class. A silvery otter took to the air as though it were a river, zipping about in a sleek swimming motion with many playful twists and rolls.

"Wonderful!" said Ondossi, who looked like she wanted to give chase to the otter and play with it. "Lovely animals, otters. Now, Miss Granger, if I wanted to make my own otter, what would I need to do?" She had Hermione describe the process, asking questions about all the details of performing the charm. "I think I get it," Ondossi finally said. "Do you mind if I try?"

"It's your classroom, Professor," said Hermione gamely.

Ondossi raised her wand and said, "*Expecto Patronum*," producing a fat, bewiskered walrus which, in some ways, vaguely resembled Professor Slughorn. It pushed up onto its front flippers and attempted to follow the otter's graceful path, but after a few awkward lurches that sent jiggles and ripples all over its blubbery skin, it just rolled onto its back and curled its tail in the air. The class roared with laughter.

"Either I've been misled, or that was one fat otter!" said Ondossi cheerfully. "Very good, then. Pair up, everyone, and let's try to make a zoo."

Ondossi went around and rearranged a few pairs to see that each set had at least one person that could perform the charm to some extent. Harry ended up with one of the "first year seventh years," a seventeen-year-old fellow living in Ravenclaw who was new to Hogwarts. He held his wand stiffly as though he was afraid it would backfire, and Harry reckoned he ought to help the fellow loosen up.

"I'm Harry," he said, offering his hand.

"Elias," said the other boy, fumbling with his wand to his other hand in order to shake with Harry. "Heh, sorry. I'm still getting used to this thing," he said in a heavy Scottish brogue, looking a bit embarrassed.

"New wand?" said Harry.

"Aye." He pronounced it "ah." "That is, I just started using one. I live up in the highlands. Me family's never had much use for wands... or much else in the wizard world, for that matter."

"That's why you've never come to Hogwarts before?" asked Harry. Elias looked away, frowning. "I'm sorry!" said Harry sincerely. "I don't mean to embarrass you. I just

never met anyone that... any other kind of wizard besides the kind that went to school." *Great job there*, he thought to himself.

Elias looked at him guardedly, but apparently decided that there were no hidden contempt in Harry's statement. "Aye, well, I've never been around so many other wizards in me life. We keep to ourselves mostly."

"What do you do, then?" Harry knew he ought to be working on the lesson, but if this fellow didn't even know how to use a *wand*, his prospects of making a Patronus were not very good.

Elias glanced around at the nearby pairs of students, all of whom were occupied in their own discussions. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked Harry with a mischievous grin.

"You have no idea," Harry said, winking.

"Well, for a living, we farm, right? But what we *do* is..." he dropped his voice, "we *haunt* things."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "You mean Mugglebaiting?!"

Elias nodded, grinning broadly. "Well, not like the Death Eaters or anything! We don't make trouble, we're *artists*. We keep the legends alive, so to speak."

Harry was duly impressed. "But that's against the law! Hasn't the Ministry come after you?"

Elias waved his hand contemptuously. "Oh, once in a great while something gets back to London and we get an inquiry. But it's not like we're doing anything spectacular--scary shadows in the cemetery, a weak love potion here and there, keep things interesting in the "haunted" houses, that sort of thing. Never anything that can be traced or proved--that's the whole point, ennit? Those twits who make toilets spit back at people? Kid stuff! Strictly amateur--who can't hex a toilet bowl? But you try setting up a scene that can't be explained by some scientific-minded Muggle with a clipboard! That's without leaving a shred of evidence, nothing to be filmed or photographed, not even a footprint or a scrap of cloth. But outrageous enough that the witnesses will stick with their story forever; if it's too weak, they decide they must've imagined it and all your effort goes for naught. It's an art form, you know."

Harry gazed in awe. "That sounds wicked! But what's that got to do with wands?"

Elias laughed. "They're not exactly subtle, eh? What good's a nice, intricate piece of spellwork that'll have people guessing for years if you have to stand in front of it with a wand to make it go? Rather gives you away, dunnit? So I've learned all me spells that don't need a wand. You don't use your wand to Apparate, eh? Okay, I may not be able to make a teapot turn into a perfect bunny rabbit, but I can make a Muggle portrait look the other way, or make a horse rear up at just the right moment. And fly me broom."

"Yeah? What're you flying?" Harry asked.

"A Nimbus. Got it used, after I sold me prize heifer--an' worth every Knut of the trade."

Harry smiled. "You play Quidditch?"

"Aye," laughed Elias. "Beater. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son, got enough cousins for ten teams. Me family's nearly as big as Hogsmeade!"

Harry had a feeling that this was his lucky day. "I'm captain for the Gryffindor team. Would you like to play for us?"

"Love to!" said Elias cheerfully. "I thought I'd play for me house, but no one's asked me. Probably be better to play for another, I suppose, with the spirit of the times, eh?"

"Works for me," Harry proffered his hand. "Harry Potter." To his surprise, Elias shook his hand without any particular reaction, not even checking for his scar. It must have shown in his face, because Elias gave him a knowing grin.

"Aye, I guessed as much. I know how it is, having a famous name. I've got one too, you see." He paused with a somewhat abashed grin. "Elias Ravenclaw."

Harry's jaw fell open automatically, even as he realized that this was exactly the kind of unwanted reaction *he* usually received. At that moment, however, Ondossi appeared beside them abruptly and said, "Less talking, more conjuring, gentlemen."

"You've saddled Potter with a grim challenge," said Elias, holding up his wand. "I've barely just learned which end of this to hold onto."

Ondossi gave Elias a piercing look which only Harry understood, then nodded approvingly. "An old-fashioned sorceror, hmm? I like that." She stepped in front of Harry as if he weren't even there, which made him feel rather affronted, but he let it go--he was quite curious about what this lesson would entail.

"Hold your arm out. Fingers straight up," she told Elias, and he did as he was instructed. "Palm forward. The Patronus will come from your palm. Keep your fingers out of the way." She moved to his side and placed her hand behind his, frowning her brow. "You don't speak your spells either, do you? *Very* old-fashioned. You're all ready for the Spanish Inquisition!" She paused as nearby students snickered. "You'll need to speak out loud for this one though--focus your mind on the joy and courage and let the words bring the spell together. Try it. I'll help you this first time."

Elias frowned at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, but closed his eyes and appeared to concentrate. Most of the class had turned to watch by now. Harry noticed Ondossi quietly raise her other hand and rest a single fingertip on the back of the boy's skull. *This ought to be good*, he thought to himself.

Presently Elias said, rather loudly, "*Expecto Patronum*." A silvery mist erupted from his hand, and though he immediately yanked his arm back as though it had touched something very hot, the mist swirled and coalesced into a vaguely quadruped shape before dissipating.

The entire class cheered. Elias looked rather embarrassed to be the focus of attention, but Ondossi held up his hand as though he had just won a boxing match. "Wonderful!" she said. "Now the rest of you, get back to work!"

Harry missed being able to talk to Ron and Hermione at mealtimes. Even if one of them sat with him at the same table, they had to practically shout across to one another. They had managed to find three red chairs in reasonable proximity at three adjoining tables, and established a little triangular territory for themselves. But they had to turn their backs on one another to eat, and people were constantly walking around the tables; any lengthy private discussion was hopeless. Besides, Hermione kept insisting that they pay more attention to people from other Houses like Professor McGonagall had intended. After less than three days of school, Harry and Ron were already developing a complex series of coded looks.

Knowing that their vocabulary of glares was not sufficiently developed for the news about Elias Ravenclaw, Harry bounded up to Ron to tell him in the corridor as they left the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. "I invited him to come and practice with us tonight, just to see if he can really fly, but he sounds like a ringer!"

Ron laughed. "Hey, now, just because he's from a big family with lots of brothers won't *automatically* make him a Beater! Okay, a lifetime of dodging obviously helps the old reflexes, but not everyone's as mental as Fred and George." Harry and Ron had reached the Great Hall by that point, and regarded one another with the usual resignation that their conversation would have to be postponed...

As though a Muggle film projector had suddenly flipped on before his eyes, Harry saw a strange sort of vision. Ron had not quite disappeared like he would during an episode of Legilimency, yet Harry knew he was seeing a fragment of Ron's thoughts. *Quidditch, that's right*, thought Harry. *We were talking about Quidditch, and brothers.*

Ron was recalling a scrimmage match with his brothers on a warm summer evening. Bill and Percy were there, not Charlie though, and Dad came home from work early enough to toss the Quaffle about with them. Fred and George had to behave themselves--no knocking young Ronnie off his broom and stranding him in the treetops with Dad around. Mum had even brought their dinner out to the stand of trees where they were playing, and it had smelled just like the aromas wafting out of the Great Hall...

"What?" said Ron, looking puzzled but not upset. The vision disappeared and Harry snapped back to the external world.

"Did you..." began Harry, but he wasn't quite sure what to ask. "I think I just read your mind. Were you thinking about a picnic with your family that smelled just like--"

"--what we're smelling now. Yeah," said Ron. "You read that?"

"Yes!" said Harry enthusiastically, but Ron looked downright flustered.

"Oh, that's just grand! Everyone tells me when you do Legilimency, their whole life flashes before their eyes. And all I see is dinner?" Ron's face sagged with disappointed resignation.

"No, no, something was different this time," said Harry. "It was like I just caught a single thought... at the forefront of your mind." Harry's voice slowed as comprehension began to dawn in his mind. This must be the same thing Tura had done earlier in class. "Ron, quick, think about something else," he said with excitement. "Don't tell me what it is." Harry concentrated on recalling and duplicating his composure before he saw the vision.

Ron gaped at Harry as though he'd just asked Ron to do a backflip. "Uhh..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on, just think of anything! What'd we do in class tod--ah, never mind, I can't already know what it is. Just think, already!"

Staring in disbelief at Harry, Ron only managed to open and close his mouth, resembling a brilliant red tropical fish. "My mind's a blank."

"RON!" said Harry in exasperation.

"Well, you try it sometime, you big git!" squawked Ron defensively. "This is worse than being called on in class! Just shut up a minute, let me think." He closed his eyes, but Harry could see the pupils flickering about under the lids. "Okay... no, wait, not that, hold on."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Ron!" Harry was afraid if he waited too long to try again, he'd lose the insight of how to do it.

"Okay!" Ron finally said sharply. "Try it now."

Harry started to peer deep beyond Ron's eyes, but his stomach tightened and he knew instinctively that he was pushing further than he wanted to go. *It was just casual eye contact, a friendly glance.* Harry tried again with a less intense gaze, but nothing happened.

"Well?" asked Ron dubiously.

Harry harrumphed. "Are you sure you're thinking?"

Now it was Ron's turn to roll his eyes. "I'm about to start thinking you're a complete prat."

Harry grinned despite his efforts to concentrate. "Fine, fine, just don't tell me, I have to try before I forget how." He forced himself to unfurrow his brows, drop his shoulders, unclench his jaw. He'd been perfectly relaxed, having a normal conversation with a friend; they'd been exchanging the casual sorts of glances that people do as they walk along and talk with someone. Harry blinked his eyes several times, trying to focus at the proper depth, but nothing worked; all he could see was Ron, who was looking more and more dubious with every passing second.

Small crowds of students were beginning to gather both behind them in the Entrance Hall and before them in the Great Hall. Harry and Ron were not completely blocking the door, but they were certainly prominently visible within it, as though it were a picture frame. Harry began to feel self-conscious, knowing he must look ridiculous standing in the middle of the entryway, blinking and staring. *Drat!* Harry thought, *I guess I just have to wait until it happens again.*

At that precise moment, the room became less distinct again, and Harry saw the two of them flying Mr. Weasley's blue Anglia into the Whomping Willow.

"The car, our second year, right?!" Harry nearly shouted, gripping Ron gleefully by the forearms.

Ron grinned, surprised. "That's it!"

"And you didn't feel anything, did you?" Harry asked.

Wrinkling his forehead and shrugging, Ron said, "You were just looking at me strangely. That was it."

As Harry broke into a broad grin, Hermione pushed past them and said crossly, "For heaven's sake, you two, maybe you ought to go someplace private!"

Harry and Ron glared after her in affront, then Ron snidely remarked, "Isn't that nice? Malfoy's gone, but his spirit lingers on!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione headed for the Quidditch pitch as soon as they finished their dinner that evening. Hermione brought along some books, to study in the quiet evening air, but of course Harry and Ron could think of nothing but the game. Elias was already there, zipping high above the field on his broom.

Harry and Ron stopped right in the middle of the entrance to the stadium, staring up in joyous disbelief. Elias was a skilled flier, executing incredibly sharp turns with practiced ease, all the while holding his Beater's club high overhead in one hand. At times it seemed as though his broom had stalled out underneath him; he was practicing some sort of abrupt vertical drop that neither of them had ever seen before.

"Harry," said Ron, after a long pause, *'please* tell me that's our guy up there."

"It's him," said Harry. They watched a few more minutes as Elias switched to practice an abrupt upward leap, the opposite version of his first stunt. It looked as though his broom was possessed by a wild bronco, yet Elias maintained a graceful posture along with his tenacious grip. He was clearly used to playing a rougher-than-usual version of Quidditch with those many cousins of his.

Elias caught sight of Hermione sitting in the stands and utterly ignoring him, then presently noticed Harry and Ron and made a smart landing right before them. "Think I'll do, then?" he said cheerily.

"How did you learn to fly like that?" Ron sputtered.

"Matter o' survival, ennit?" said Elias, laughing. "We play a pretty tough game when we all get together. We allow any magic as can be done without a wand--at least when the mums and aunties aren't watching." He winked. "Got to stop pretty sharp when a spell's comin' straight for yah. Get up, I'll show the both of you a trick or two, if you like."

Harry and Ron leapt onto their brooms in an instant, leaving Hermione clicking her teeth reproachfully in the stands as she flipped open her Arithmancy text.

By Friday afternoon, it occurred to Harry that he had not done a single Occlumency lesson during the entire first week of school. Potions and Charms were all fine and

good, but he hadn't returned to Hogwarts to take classes; he was here to learn whatever Ondossi was supposed to teach him.

The professor didn't attend dinner in the Great Hall that evening, so Harry trudged down to the dungeons to inquire about their next lesson. It was hard for Harry to go down there at all, but somehow in the summer brightness and quiet, it had seemed more neutral, more bearable. But now that the nights were growing longer and the familiar background sounds of house-elves and Slytherins echoing almost imperceptibly through the stones had returned, every trip down to the dungeons was a stark reminder of the man Harry hated almost as much as Voldemort. It was no wonder Slughorn had declined to inhabit Snape's former office again this year; the very walls were contaminated by treachery of their former occupant.

Ondossi didn't seem to mind a bit, but of course she had never met either HIM or Dumbledore; for her, they were just more rocks and stones that didn't "know" her. Perhaps the feeling that the dungeon somehow still contained Snape's inherent evil was the sort of magic she was referring to when she spoke of the Earth as though it were alive. It was strange, Harry pondered, that the stones of Gryffindor Tower were probably mined from this very passage of the dungeons, yet the two places could hardly feel more different. Down here, the stones were cold, dark, suffocating; in the Tower, they seemed cozy and protective. But surely they were the same color and temperature in both places. Perhaps there was something to Tura's ramblings after all.

Ondossi didn't answer when Harry knocked on her door. It annoyed him that he'd made the trip down that despised corridor for nothing, almost as much as the fact that he still had no lessons planned. Harry knew he would see her on Sunday to assist with her remedial Defense Against the Dark Arts class, but that would make it a whole week since his last lesson. Even though he hadn't liked what he'd seen in her mind, he'd managed to step away on his own, *and* he'd limited his vision with Ron. Who knew when he'd be in the groove like this again?

Frustrated, Harry climbed the long, familiar flights of stairs to his room atop Gryffindor Tower and rummaged through his trunk. He found the Marauder's Map after a brief search--it was a lot easier to find things after Hermione forced him to clean the trunk out to repair that mirror. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Ondossi's presence on the Map. Harry searched it carefully from top to bottom; she wasn't in the castle.

Ron bounded into the dormitory, startling both of them with his sudden appearance. "Hey, Harry--we're all getting started on that big Charms assignment, you coming?" he asked, picking up his textbook from the foot of his bed.

"Hmm?" mumbled Harry distractedly. "Erm, yeah, I'll be down in a bit, I suppose."

"You suppose?" Ron asked indignantly. "Better not let Hermione hear you talking about homework like that! She might drop dead from the outrage." Ron peered more closely and recognized the Map. "What're you up to, then?"

"I was trying to find Ondossi," Harry said. "As much as I love my other classes, I'd rather like to get on with Occlumency lessons. She's not in the castle."

Ron looked intrigued. "Are you fancying a little hunt, then?"

Laughing, Harry said, "Now Ron, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were procrastinating."

"On a Friday night?" said Ron. "Why, I resemble that remark!"

As the sun had not quite set, the two of them felt justified in going out to the grounds, but they brought along Harry's Invisibility cloak for their return--not to mention for slipping past the rather unenthusiastic group of seventh years in the common room watching Hermione set up the Charm they'd been assigned. Once out on the stone steps before the castle, however, they weren't quite sure where to start.

"Do you suppose she's back in the Shrieking Shack?" asked Ron.

Harry frowned. "I doubt it. She sticks to her word, once you can get it out of her. But she did mention moving into the greenhouses once."

A quick jaunt to the Herbology buildings revealed no sign of anyone, except a few semi-sentient plants which seemed to eyeball the young men hungrily, despite their lack of ocular apparati. Harry wondered if she were crazy enough to move into the Forbidden Forest despite the centaurs, when he spotted the lights on in Hagrid's cabin.

"You know, Hagrid's her friend, maybe she's down there," said Harry.

"Let's go then," said Ron enthusiastically. "Hagrid may have some more news about the giants, in any case."

Harry hesitated a moment. "He *is* our Head of House now... maybe we shouldn't deliberately sneak down to his house after hours."

Ron had already started down the hill, but he stopped and glanced back at Harry with pure incomprehension. "Are you joking? This is Hagrid we're talking about. He'd probably dock House points if we *didn't* come visit once in a while!" Ron winked and continued down the hill.

Harry rapped firmly on Hagrid's door. As soon as it opened, Fang bounded out to bestow loving (but sloppy) greetings upon both of them. "Knew it was you!" said Hagrid with equal affection, ushering Harry and Ron inside. "Term's not even a week old--who else would be out after dark, breakin' the rules already?"

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry warmly, extracting himself from Fang's soggy welcome so the mutt could concentrate his efforts on Ron. Harry did a bit of a double-take as he regarded the interior of Hagrid's hut; the stone walls were darker, charred by the same fire that had consumed the roof, which was now made of a pale, fragrant wood. Gone were the dozens of items Hagrid had always kept suspended from hooks in the ceiling--only a thin bundle of unicorn hair, some cured meats, and a coarse net bag full of fruit dangled beyond Harry's reach now. Though Harry recalled putting out the fire fairly quickly, apparently Hagrid's furniture had been damaged beyond repair and had been replaced. Even Hagrid's immense table, which had seemed sturdy and thick enough to weather a bit of fire, was gone; in its place stood one equally large but far more delicate-looking.

"Quite a difference, eh?" noted Hagrid rather proudly. "Yeh know, I remembered somethin' me mum once tol' me, when I was just a wee tot. I was cleanin' up from the fire and suddenly it was clear as day: her sayin' that it wasn't good teh stay in one place fer too long, yeh have to move on and break clean or yeh'll become a slave to yer possessions. I think that mighta been righ' before she lef' us, maybe. Anyways, I'd forgot all about it 'til I was pickin' through the rubble and feelin' sorry for meself, and then it come back to me in a flash. I'd been livin' in one room more'n fifty years, never changin' nothing."

Hagrid tut-tutted at himself, shaking his head. "An' here I'm tryin' ter get to know a classy lady, tryin' to make a nice little home for Grawpy, wi' half a century o' dirt on me floors and walls. It was hard, losin' all the things I'd had fer so long, but then Mum's words set me straight. It's all junk, yeh know, Harry, Ron... all tha' matters in the en' is the company yeh keep."

With that, Hagrid began to sniffle tearfully and pulled Harry and Ron swiftly into one-armed hugs that tenderly knocked the wind out of both of them. Trapped on either side of Hagrid's vast girth and turning purple with effort to breathe, Harry and Ron regarded one another with hints of smiles in their bulging eyes, along with a tad of concern that Hagrid might inadvertently do them both in.

When Hagrid finally let go and both of them enjoyed a welcome rush of air into their lungs, Harry fell into Ron's mind further than he had ever gone with anyone.

As he had done with Ondossi, Harry found himself shrugging off his own identity and seemingly *becoming* Ron, seeing his memories not only through Ron's eyes but all of his senses, with all the rich emotional overtones that were unique to Ron and therefore colored every minute of his day with a shade all his own. But Ron was no Occlumens, and did not restrict Harry's vision only to selected incidents. Ron's whole life was suddenly open to Harry, probably more of it than Ron himself could remember.

Harry recognized immediately that the limited glimpses he'd seen of Ron during the wedding reception were but a distorted fraction of his friend. At a moment of chemically-enhanced loneliness and self-pity, Ron had dropped briefly into a mode of thinking he'd outgrown years before. The "modern" Ron was quietly confident: the young man who



had stepped courageously into the unknown in the Chamber of Secrets, the Department of Mysteries, and the vacant lot at Godric's Hollow.

Harry could see the turning point that had brought Ron out of his shell. It had happened on the Quidditch pitch, of all places. Not the game in which Ron believed he'd taken the Felix Felicis, nor even the one after that, but their last match, the one Harry spent in detention with Snape. Through Ron's memory, Harry saw the entire game in a flash--as well as Ron's epiphany. Ron was out there *without Harry*. All the excitement and admiration he'd felt from the stands as a spectator... and now *he* was a player, as independent and valuable as Charlie or Fred or George had ever been. He'd let the Quaffle slip past him, he was so caught up in the revelation that, just perhaps, he'd been valuable all his life.

What little bit of Harry that remained separate and objective chuckled at the irony, that Ron had faced so many fearsome challenges over the years, yet his confidence had finally bloomed during a Quidditch game. Harry made a mental note to point that out painstakingly to Hermione in the near future. Realizing that he'd become distracted, Harry parted from Ron's mind almost effortlessly, only to find that he could barely stand when he was firmly planted in himself again.

Just as the Legilimency had been more powerful than ever, so now was the numbness that followed it. Harry felt as if his will had evaporated; even breathing seemed a paltry waste of time and effort. Fortunately, Hagrid caught him as his knees gave way. "Oops, there. I've seen that look before," Harry heard Hagrid mutter. "No turnin' blue on me now, Harry, lad," he said firmly as he picked Harry up like a rag doll and set him rather roughly in one of the oversized chairs at the table.

"You okay there, Ron?" said Hagrid, shaking Harry's shoulders until his daze broke long enough to put his lungs back to work. Harry slumped sideways until he became wedged into the chair; he was far too serene to care if he fell, or twisted his neck uncomfortably. But he recognized that breathing was a requirement, and Hagrid nodded approvingly before turning back to Ron.

"Yeh'll be needin' a bit o' chocolate, I wager," said the enormous professor as he lumbered over to the fireplace and fetched the kettle. Hagrid poured two oversized mugs of tea and rummaged in his new pantry for a tin of chocolate squares. Ron was quite relieved to find that these were "store bought," not homemade, and gratefully took several bars to have with his tea.

"Hagrid... what's wrong with Harry? Did I do something to him?" Ron asked.

Hagrid glanced back at Harry before plopping into his own chair and slurping some tea. "Nah, he's all right," said Hagrid with a casual wave of his arm. "He'll come roun' again pretty quick. Tura gets like that too, though I've never got a straight answer from her abou' why it is. Said somethin' about 'becomin' a being o' pure thought,' wha'ever that means, silly gel."

Hagrid reached over and gently pulled Harry's eyes closed with one swipe of his huge hand. "Can't stand tha' empty stare," he told Ron confidentially. "Reminds me of a fish layin' out on a slab of ice, yeh know? There were a few times I thought we'd los' Tura; she worked over some o' them Sasquatch giants pretty hard before she'd trust 'em with Grawpy. I think they get so caught up in Legilimency, they forget they got a body ter keep alive, too. She gets her hackles up at me an' says, 'I never died yet,' but it's no fun watchin' her turn gray from bein' so still. You an' Hermione oughter keep an eye on Harry, make sure he don' forget ter breathe."

Harry attempted to say, "That's not necessary," but the words were so slurred, no one could understand him.

"Oh, an' wait'll he starts ter talk," said Hagrid with a knowing wink. "He'll say the darnedest things."

Ron kept an anxious eye on Harry as Hagrid chattered away as though nothing was amiss. "Whad'ya think o' me new digs, eh? Cherry wood," he said reverently, rapping on the glossy tabletop. "Made in America. Oh, Ron, lad, you should see them giants there. It's like night an' day, compared to us. There's a giant *city* not far from where Tura grew up; tha's how she knew of 'em, to arrange the meetin's. I guess the giant city's in Canada, technic'ly speakin', but it's all just miles and miles o' wilderness up there anyhow. That's where me furniture came from--built by giants!" He rapped the table again proudly.

"It's very nice, Hagrid," said Ron politely, and it was; though big and strong enough to hold Grawp, the chairs were elegantly made with flowing form and many carved details. Ron recalled a story Harry had once mentioned about a man named Gulliver who had traveled to a land of tiny people, then to a land of giants. Perhaps the author had stumbled into the northern Canada wilderness. "What's the city called?" Ron asked curiously.

Hagrid cocked his head a moment, then to the other side. "I don' reckon it's got one, Ron. Never heard no mention of a name, now that I think of it. There's only one, so I suppose they jus' call it The City."

Ron nodded, grinning. Giants were not big talkers, even if they did "get civilized."

Both of them jumped as Harry spoke. "Hagrid." Harry had opened his eyes, though he still slouched to the side of his chair as though his body had been forgotten.

"Need somethin', Harry?" asked Hagrid.

"Yes. I wish to ask you some difficult questions."

Hagrid paled slightly and gulped. He peered uneasily at Ron. "Ut oh." He pulled the tin of chocolates closer to his chair. "All righ' then, Harry. Ask away."

"Tell me all that happened in Godric's Hollow."

Hagrid groaned painfully. "I was afraid o' that comin'. You sure this is the time, Harry--you bein' all funny at the moment?"

"I'm sure. Please speak of it."

Turning even more pale, Hagrid gulped the rest of his tea, then pulled his chair around to face Harry. "Better get comfy, Ron," he said with a final glance at his other guest. "We'll be here a while."

## 14: Shadows of the Past

*Chapter 14 of 50*

Harry gleans Hagrid's perspective of the events on Halloween night, 1981.



Rubeus Hagrid pulled off his soaked moleskin coat and hung it beside the fireplace. He had just returned from the Forbidden Forest. It was cold and windy enough to be mistaken for a winter night, not autumn, but he'd deliberately and cheerfully faced the stinging rain. It was Halloween, after all, and he'd enjoyed a lovely feast up at the castle; he wanted his friends in the forest to celebrate the holiday as well.

Hagrid had been expelled from Hogwarts and lost his magical privileges because of one of those friends, Aragog, but he was far too kindhearted to hold a grudge. He'd spent the next twelve years wandering the world, unwelcome in either human, wizard, or giant society, but universally accepted by animals both mundane and magical. Any creatures who were not calmed by his patient and gentle nature were no match for his persistence and sheer strength.

Albus Dumbledore recognized all of these qualities (*and* their value) in Hagrid. As soon as he became Headmaster of Hogwarts, he found Hagrid on a small Mediterranean island, getting to know a minotaur (or, to be completely accurate, *attempting* to get to know a minotaur. Such beasts were as reclusive and ill-tempered as centaurs, but with twice their muscle mass. Hagrid had foolishly annoyed the creature further by mentioning a wizard named Daedalus Diggle. It turned out that this very beast was a direct descendant of "The Minotaur" made famous in Greek mythology--when he was imprisoned in a Labyrinth by a bloke named Daedalus. It hadn't helped when Hagrid responded to this information by saying, "Amazin'!").

Dumbledore appointed Hagrid the gamekeeper at Hogwarts, and never regretted the decision. Hagrid kept all of the beasts in the Forbidden Forest under a firm but gentle thumb, and in addition grew some of the finest squash and apples in the UK. Ogg, the Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts, had refused to retire from his post until he was certain that the castle would be left in capable hands. Within ten years of Hagrid's arrival, Ogg departed in complete satisfaction.

Despite Dumbledore's unyielding esteem, Hagrid did not feel it was his place to dine in the castle. He knew his beloved Aragog was not the Beast from the Chamber of Secrets, but he'd been raised to respect his "betters" and if they'd seen fit to expell him from the school, then by Jove he must've done *something* wrong. He tended his own garden and cooked for himself, but on holidays and special occasions, he would sneak down to the kitchens after the Great Hall had emptied and assist the other servants at eliminating all the leftovers. The house-elves always made plenty of food on such occasions, and they barely nibbled more than a kernel of corn at any one sitting, so Hagrid felt he was doing a valuable service by disposing of the excess.

As always, when he left the castle, the house-elves foisted upon him all the food he could carry (which was a considerable amount). Hagrid hauled it straight out to the Forest, sharing sweet pumpkin tarts with the unicorns and savory meats with the thestrals (his pride and joy, being the only breeding herd in captivity). Even a few of the younger, more "hip" centaurs were in the habit of trotting by for candied apples on Halloween, although this year the rain kept most of them in their deep forest dwellings. They preferred Hagrid's apples straight off the tree anyway.

The fireplace in the groundskeeper's cabin had been included in the Floo Network over 500 years ago, but like the rest of the castle, it was limited strictly to communication purposes, not travel (except during the summer months when there were no students present). There had been a legendary mistake in the 1870's when a hearth in Hogsmeade had been added to the routing and somehow crossed paths with the fireplace in the cabin. The groundskeeper at the time became so furious with unexpected "guests" popping through the Floo that he rigged up an elaborate deterrent system of pulleys and ropes, culminating in the release hatch of a huge reservoir of water over the hearth. At the first sign of movement, the hatch would open and drown the fire, leaving the poor traveler stuck in the network, too dizzy to find another fire and too drenched to get out anyway. Eighteen sorcerers had become long-term occupants of the Floo before the Ministry had managed to correct the problem; there may have been more, but only these were hauled out by the repair crew. The Ministry had developed a rather unfavorable impression of the cabin and its fireplace in lieu of the circumstances, and the Floo had never worked very well after that.

Thus Hagrid was taken quite by surprise, as he warmed his damp, chilly backside over the roaring flames, suddenly to hear Dumbledore himself speaking from the Floo. "Hag-- good gracious me, have I reached the right Floo? Oh. Quite so."

Hagrid performed a leaping pirouette that a ballerina would envy, were it not for the ungainly landing. "Headmaster!" he sputtered, chagrined by the view he had just provided his employer.

"Hagrid, this is most urgent. Meet me at the castle doors immediately!"

Hagrid paused only to pull on his leather boots before bursting from the cabin, without coat or umbrella. He dashed up the slippery lawn, nearly tripping over the first of the stone steps in the rainy darkness.

Dumbledore had already propped open one oak door, his pointed hat eclipsing all but a sliver of the golden torchlight within the Entry Hall. In an uncharacteristic fashion, he waved to Hagrid impatiently, almost frantically. The summons was unnerving enough, but the concept of Dumbledore needing to rush sent Hagrid into a near frenzy. He bolted up the steps four at a time, again nearly losing his footing on the sleek wet stone.

"Hurry, Hagrid," said Dumbledore, stepping outside onto the landing and closing the oak doors behind him. Casting a cautious glance overhead, Dumbledore finally leaned close to Hagrid and placed a silver quill in his hand. "Take this. A Portkey. Listen carefully, Hagrid, there may not be much time." Hagrid swallowed hard, straining to hear and memorize every word that Dumbledore uttered.

"The Portkey will take you to Godric's Hollow, to the home of the Potters," said Dumbledore in a quiet, strained voice. "I will activate it in a moment with the password. I believe something very terrible, or very great, has happened, but I also fear a trap. I do not know what you will find. Search thoroughly, Hagrid, but do not be seen by anyone, Wizard or Muggle. You will repeat the password to return here when you must."

Dumbledore paused and put his hands on Hagrid's forearms. "Hagrid, *please* be cautious. I dread that I may be sending you into great danger, but I dare not leave the castle undefended. You must be my eyes and ears, Hagrid. Are you ready?"

Hagrid nodded, too astounded to reply, and Dumbledore responded with a curt nod of his own. "Very good. Listen closely: the password to the Portkey is *Campanula*--" At the end of the last syllable, Hagrid felt as though his belly had tossed out a rope and lassoed a passing train.

In an instant, the wind, rain, and castle were gone and all Hagrid could see was a giant pile of rubble. "The Potter's house?" Hagrid mumbled. It took him a moment to process the notion that the detritus before him was all that remained of his destination. *Dumbledore's ears and eyes*, he thought, and forced himself to concentrate. He had to collect every detail at the scene, even those he might not usually grant a second glance, for it was impossible to tell which ones would be crucial.

Something had been dragged along the ground from the rubble. Hagrid followed the smudges through the dust, but the trail ended at a paved road, the stiff macadam indifferent to Hagrid's desperate need for information. He returned carefully alongside the trail to the edge of the wreckage, noting the occasional marks of dragging fingertips or heels; clearly a body had been hauled over the dirt. He identified a few partial shoeprints here and there along the trail, though most had been obliterated. Men's style shoes, pointing toward the rubble; it appeared that the cadaver had been pulled out by one person walking backwards, barely strong enough to lift the torso from the ground.

Hagrid knelt at the point where the trail began, observing a few more prints of that same shoe. He tried to envision the pathway within the rubble where the pilferer had removed the body, and sure enough, he could see a few bits of cloth, blood, and tissue snagged on some of the debris. The blood was still wet; Hagrid realized with a shiver that whatever happened here had taken place just moments ago.

He could barely hear the distant wail of a siren, but otherwise all was still. No, not completely. There was a sound coming from...where? Hagrid pulled his unkempt hair from his ears and turned his head...*it was within the rubble!* Something was still alive in there, a cat by the sound of it.

Or, he suddenly realized, a baby.

Hagrid had not known Lily or James terribly well, but joyous gossip of babies always traveled widely at Hogwarts. He knew the Potters had a wee tot. Whoever had pulled the body (Lily's? James's?) out of the rubble had left the poor lad behind. Hagrid no longer considered his charge of gathering information; there was a life at stake, and that trumped all other concerns.

He focused completely on the sound and made a beeline toward its source. Fortunately it was not very far into the jumbled heap. *There, under that bit o' roof.* Hagrid flipped it out of the way, to reveal a human baby so small he could hold it in one palm.

Hagrid had seen babies before, certainly many baby animals, but this little tyke looked so tiny

and delicate that he hardly dared pick it up. He told himself not to be so silly, the little one had just survived his house crashing down around him, and besides, he had to be at least a year old, surely past that floppy, fragile stage. *Poor little angel.* Hagrid steeled himself and picked up the baby carefully, bringing along the little blanket to bundle the wee thing.

There was a sudden rumble of machinery approaching, but it was too loud and sudden to be the Muggle vehicle with the siren. Hagrid stood up and scanned around anxiously, then saw a glint of thin moonlight reflecting from the chrome fenders of a motorbike. He recognized it at once; Sirius Black had earned the ire of a great many centaurs by leaving a number of "donuts" in their favorite clearing of the Forbidden Forest. "Black?" he called.

A strangled groan came to him in response. Hagrid headed straight for the sound with little Harry crying loudly in his hand. Black stood frozen beside the motorbike, clenching and unclenching his hands in helpless fury. He sputtered a few more times, unable to form a coherent sentence, but when Hagrid grew nearer, a glimmer of recognition formed as Black heard Harry's cry.

"The baby? Harry? Hagrid?" said Black. "Where are they? Where's James?" He gripped Hagrid's forearm tightly as soon as he was near enough to reach; Black's hands were clammy and white as the moonlight.

"I dunno, Black, I dunno what happened. Someone's been dragged out, maybe it was James pullin' Lily, I dunno."

Black's eyes glazed with horror. "It wasn't James," he said, choking on the words. "James is dead."

Hagrid pondered this only long enough to reason that if someone had pulled James's body from the rubble, then Lily might still be in there, possibly alive. "Lily," he said with determination. "Take the lad." There was no need to give that order; Black was already reaching for the baby with a look of reverent gratitude, and hugged the little bundle tightly against his chest. Hagrid strode immediately back into the ruined house to search for Lily. "A good mum'd be near her tot if there was danger," he muttered, kicking aside large sheets of plaster and roofing on his way back to the crib.

He found her. Sure enough, she must have been only steps from the baby. The sight of her gave Hagrid a chill. She looked calm and serene as though she were merely staring off into space, lost in thought. Hagrid knew she was dead, from the *Kedavra* curse, by the look of it. She was barely out of school. Hagrid howled in agony over the terrible injustice that would leave a young woman dead and her baby an orphan.

Her remains were pinned underneath a heavy piece of timber, probably the main crossbeam that held the roof together. Hagrid couldn't lift it, and to his chagrin, the sirens were definitely coming closer. He clambered back out of the wreckage once more to find Black sitting on the ground, pressing little Harry to his chest and rocking his upper body as if to comfort the child, but his own sobs kept the baby from calming down.

Hagrid plopped down beside Black, knowing they must go before the Muggle authorities arrived. He squeezed Black's shoulders and patted his hair gently, trying desperately to find something to say to dispell the young man's grief. "Black! Pull yourself together, lad! We gotta go! Gotta get little Harry someplace safe, lad. There's a good chap," he said, as Black nodded in recognition of Hagrid's point and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"I'll take him," said Black with firm finality.

Hagrid wasn't too sure about that decision. "Maybe he oughter come with me, ter Hogwarts... Dumbledore might--"

"I'LL take him," snapped Black, looking him in the eye. "I'm his godfather. I'm all he has left. He's all I--" Black's voice cut off under threat of renewed sobs. He opened his black leather jacket and put Harry inside, cinching the belt at the bottom very snug and buckling the front nearly all the way up, leaving only Harry's little face peeking out. The baby had stopped crying, as though comforted by Black's presence, but he still whimpered with distress. "Ma, ma, ma," he said plaintively, as a Muggle police wagon rounded the last bend up the road.

"Where will yeh take him?" asked Hagrid urgently, but Black leapt onto the motorbike and sped off without another word. The headlights from the Muggle vehicle were approaching rapidly; Hagrid took hold of the silver quill in resignation and muttered, "Campanula."

"Hagrid!" Dumbledore sat behind the desk in his office. Hagrid noticed right away that the furniture had been moved to clear a space for him, but Dumbledore nonetheless jumped at his sudden appearance. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Had ter get out right quick, Headmaster," said Hagrid. "The Muggles were showin' up."

"Tell me everything, Hagrid," said Dumbledore in a level but urgent tone.

The Headmaster had winced as though stabbed in the chest when Hagrid told of finding Lily's body in the destroyed house, but he took the news of the mysterious disappearing cadaver with his usual unflappability. As Hagrid described his rescue of little Harry and the peculiar cut on the child's forehead, Dumbledore's face grew more and more solemn. He was scowling deeply by the time Hagrid reached the end of the tale.

"Hagrid... you asked young Sirius where he intended to take the child?"

"Yessir. He din' answer, sir." Dumbledore's demeanor was making Hagrid feel more apprehensive by the minute, and he began absently fiddling with the nearest silver contraption on the Headmaster's desk. Dumbledore whapped Hagrid's hand smartly, but did not look up from his internal reverie nor speak for several minutes.

"I have a number of concerns, Hagrid," Dumbledore finally began, lacing his fingers together on his desk with a grim stiffness that suggested he'd prefer to be wringing his hands then holding them so calm and still. "I believe Sirius is acting somewhat rashly at the moment. I don't think he has much experience with young toddlers and has

bitten off far more than he can chew. Nor is he the only remaining family of the child. I would like the boy brought to me."

Dumbledore took a small scrap of parchment from his desk drawer and tapped it with his wand, muttering softly under his breath. An address appeared on the parchment, along with a small green arrow pointing south. Dumbledore looked long and hard at the writing and nodded, then offered the parchment to Hagrid.

"There are things I must attend to, my friend," Dumbledore said. "I would like you to perform one more service for me. I ask you to find the boy and bring him to this address. It is in London--a distinctly Muggle section of London. I will meet the two of you there at midnight tonight, but you will still need to be discrete when you approach. The arrow will direct you," Dumbledore added with a reassuring smile, but the casual demeanor didn't fool Hagrid for a minute. His normally ruddy hands were pale and trembling as he took the parchment and tucked it into a shirt pocket.

"I'm not certain where Sirius would take the boy," continued Dumbledore in a conversational tone. "Obviously, you might first try his house in Bristol, then the house of his parents in London. If neither proves productive, you must attempt to track him down. I can think of no one more resourceful at tracking than you, Hagrid. Just be sure to bring your umbrella." Dumbledore leveled a knowing look at Hagrid that made him gulp uncomfortably.

"I think it is probably best, Hagrid, if you encounter any other wizards during your efforts, to keep mum about what you have seen. I also caution you that young Sirius may be most unwilling to part with the baby. Perhaps utterly unwilling." Dumbledore paused as the anxious scowl returned to his face momentarily. "I hope that you can *persuade* him, however, it may be necessary to be more... firm."

"I'll have little Harry to yeh by midnight," said Hagrid quietly.

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled briefly behind his crescent-moon spectacles. "Of that I have no doubt, Rubeus."

Hagrid charged into his cabin to snatch up his umbrella and pull a large slab of pork from the icebox. His puppy, Fang, yipped excitedly at his return, particularly when the pork appeared, and Hagrid automatically let him outside as he took the meat into the forest and set it out to attract a thestral. The rain had stopped, and he hoped that the forests' denizens would still be prowling nearby in expectation of their annual Halloween tidbits. Fang naturally fled back to the cabin at the sound of the first snapped twig. Hagrid had considered bringing him along on the hunt--the pup had a clever nose that might come in handy. But there was no foot trail to follow, after all, and Hagrid knew of some magical creatures that might better serve his purposes than his cowardly pooch. He had no bait with which to entice them, however, so he set out the pork and hoped the thestrals would hurry.

Indeed, a small herd arrived scant minutes later, clopping softly in the wet undergrowth. Hagrid placed a lariat around the neck of the largest one he could find and tethered it to a tree. He shooed the others away to enable the one to eat all of the meat; it had a long ride ahead of it.

Hagrid knew he had no peppers in his cabin, so he ran back up to the castle. There were only a handful of house-elves in the kitchen preparing pastries and muffins for breakfast; they were only able to find a few somewhat withered green bell peppers for him, which he knew would not suffice. For a moment, he considered waking the new Potions professor, who must have a store of capsaicin-rich plants in his stockroom. Hagrid had many years of experience handling grouchy creatures, however, and decided to hold that off as a last resort. Instead, he scooped up the peppers and charged up the stairs to Minerva McGonagall's quarters.

She opened her office door wearing a tartan bathrobe and ridiculous fuzzy slippers, her hair in disarray and smelling vaguely of cucumbers. "Hagrid?" she said skeptically, blinking at the torchlight in the corridor and looking dangerously close to clubbing him with the nearest heavy object.

"I'm sorry, Professor, emergency. Can you Transfigure these for me? Only I've gotter catch some Fireflies an' these aren't strong enough."

She blinked a few more times, then shuddered off the last vestiges of sleep and stepped back to allow the groundskeeper into her office. "Of course. Fireflies. Whatever for, Hagrid?"

He cleared his throat nervously. "I've gotter find someone quick."

Rolling her eyes, McGonagall set the peppers out on her desk for the Transfiguration. "I inferred that much, Hagrid," she said pointedly, and glared at him expectantly.

"I'm not s'posed to say nothin' about it, Professor, but trus' me, it's important."

Her brows flew up in surprise at his unusual discretion, but she Transfigured the bell peppers into a small, red-orange, shrunken variety that looked positively lethal even to Hagrid and his cast-iron stomach. Just picking them up and wrapping them in his handkerchief made his fingertips tingle uncomfortably. "They're perfect, Professor," he said with a little bow of gratitude. "Thank you."

She called after him before he closed the door. "Hagrid? You dropped this." In her hand was the scrap of parchment with the address in London where he was to meet Dumbledore. It was too late to stop her; she was already studying it curiously.

"Ah, tha's nothin' there, just..." Hagrid began, but he was one of the world's worst liars, and she one of the world's shrewdest judges of character. The battle was lost before it had begun and he knew it. "I'm meetin' the Headmaster there at midnight," he confessed resignedly. "But please don't tell anyone else! It's... very important."

McGonagall's expression softened. "So you've said. Well. I don't suppose the Headmaster would object if one of his staff took a holiday to *discreetly* scout out this important meeting place. Perhaps I shall see you at midnight, Hagrid--which leaves me less than twenty-one hours to locate this address. I bid you adieu, then," she said, stuffing the parchment into his hand and closing her office door firmly.

Bolting down the marble stairs to the Entry Hall, Hagrid gnawed on a wisp of his beard and muttered, "I shouldn'ta tol' her that."

For what he hoped was the last time that night, Hagrid rushed back to the Forbidden Forest and set out his next bait near the thestral, which was already beginning to tug at its tether impatiently. Although it realistically took no more than five minutes, it seemed like hours had passed and dawn must surely be imminent before the peppers worked their own magic. A single flash of light, soon followed by two more, appeared over the dry pods. Hagrid tossed his handkerchief over the peppers and the three Fireflies eagerly gobbling them up, then folded them all together and stuffed them into a pocket. He hoped the peppers were big enough to keep them munching contentedly until he was ready to use them, otherwise he'd need a new shirt when they burned their way out of his pocket.

Hagrid gave the thestral an apologetic pat as he climbed on its back. It snorted at him but took to the air obediently, and within twenty minutes, the lights of London appeared as a steady glow on the distant horizon. The beast soon put London well on his left, heading for Bristol.

Like all of its kind, the thestral had an innate and magical sense of direction, and took him directly to Sirius Black's doorstep. *Pity they can only find locations so easy, not people*, Hagrid thought as he dismounted the reptilian horse. He felt doubtful; there was no sign of the motorbike and the house was dark and silent. Hagrid pounded on Black's door for some time anyway, until an irate neighbor shouted something barely intelligible but almost certainly derogatory. Hagrid sighed. Black could ignore enough pounding to wake the neighbors, but the baby would be wailing by now if he were within.

The thestral found the Black's ancestral home in London quickly enough, though it reared at the curb and refused to step off the pavement. The sun had not risen but there was certainly enough ambient light for the beast to be seen quite clearly as it stood in the road, but Hagrid didn't have many options. Fortunately, few people would be up at this hour, and even fewer of them had the prerequisite experience to see a thestral anyway. Hagrid tethered the beast to a lamppost, wishing he had Dumbledore's marvelous little Put-Outer for the occasion.

The house itself existed in Unplottable space between two other homes; a non-wizard would never even know it was there. But the thestral was not fooled by such things, and Hagrid knew he could trust it. He simply walked up to the region where the thestral refused to tread and, sure enough, the lawn parted to reveal another sidewalk. Two steps upon the cobbles and the neighboring houses parted similarly, as the House of Black appeared between them.

Hagrid paused at the top of the worn stone steps. It was one thing to wake Professor McGonagall in the middle of the night on semi-official business, but another entirely to disturb the powerful and wealthy Blacks unannounced. Hagrid knew that Sirius Black had been at odds with his family; one look at the door knocker in the shape of a twisted serpent explained why. This was a house of pureblood wizards, most likely Dark at that. Hagrid would not be welcomed here under *any* circumstances, particularly the current ones.

He had one shining beam of hope: these aristocrats probably kept servants who would respond to the door at this hour. Crossing his fingers, Hagrid attempted to lift the silver tail of the serpent and knock, but the blasted thing was obviously charmed to resist the grip of non-purebloods or non-humans, or whatever "undesirables" the Blacks saw fit to exclude (a category to which he obviously belonged). *Not very hospitable at all, I'd say*, he thought, and resorted to rapping the door very gently with a knuckle.

A wizened house-elf yanked open the door on his third attempt and stared at him reproachfully. It regarded him silently for so long that Hagrid began to wonder if it was a mute. When it finally spoke in a deep, croaking voice, Hagrid quickly decided he preferred the silence.

"What's all this, then? Someone leaving garbage, great dirty heaps of it, on Mistress's front step? Who would guess that such ill manners still existed in this modern world, that decent folk would be harassed at all hours of the night by giant heaps of rubbish?"

"An' a good mornin' to you too, there, yeh little weasel," said Hagrid; it had been a long night and he was in no mood for this sort of treatment. "What say yeh turn off the snide an' help me out, so's we don' hafter bother yer precious Mistress."

"It speaks! And an unusually wise heap of rubbish it is, to realize that the Mistress should not waste her time attending to it herself. Perhaps I should throw a few nice pieces of trash upon it as a reward."

Hagrid came dangerously close to throttling the little twerp, but he was not yet tired or footsore enough to lose his head. "I'm lookin' for Sirius Black. If yeh can tell me where he is, I'll be on my way an' we'll both be the better for it."

The creature's watery gray eyes bugged out even further and a hint of red popped into its cheeks at the mention of that name. "How *dare* you speak of that traitor in this household?" it hissed, too angry for games anymore.

"I'll speak it again an' again, as loud as I need to, 'til I get yer answer," Hagrid said boldly. "Is he here?"

The house-elf glanced fearfully over its shoulder and stepped out onto the porch, pulling the door nearly shut behind it. "Quiet!" it hissed again, glaring malevolently at Hagrid. "Mistress will be *most* upset if she hears you. That boy has not set foot in this house for years now. Not tonight, not any night. He is not permitted here. If you seek to punish him or collect a bounty, then I bid you good luck, but you will not find him here. Now go!"

"Funny you should mention bounties," Hagrid said coolly, crossing his fingers in hope that he could pull this off. "It'd help me quite a bit if I had summat of his, jus' ter give me trackers a whiff of his scent. You wouldn't have anythin' he lef' behind, now, would yeh?"

The elf opened its wrinkly mouth in a grimace, but stopped in mid-thought. "Something for a scent... there might be something. Not anything he owned, all his tainted rubbish was thrown away along with him, but if something he *used* would be sufficient?" It glanced up at Hagrid with a sly, malicious smile. "Wait here, bounty hunter." It slipped back through the front door, reappearing a few minutes later with a delicate silver comb clutched in its blue-veined hand.

"Mistress used this to comb the brat's hair when he was little. It was too beautiful to throw away, too beautiful; it can't help that it was used on his nasty head." The elf stuffed the comb through the crack to Hagrid. "Good riddance to it, if it helps you put an end to him," said the elf with an ugly smirk, and closed the door abruptly.

Hagrid took a good look at the comb. The teeth were thin and close together, obviously made for a baby's fine hair, but the spine of the comb was fashioned like an actual spine; the teeth were supposed to represent ribs hanging from the backbones. *Now that's just wrong*, he thought, but slipped the comb into his pocket with a relieved sigh. He permitted himself a wide grin as he returned to his thestral. He'd managed to get exactly what he needed from the elf, without an ugly scene. It was a stroke of pure luck that the creature had made assumptions on its own; if Hagrid had been forced to lie, he would probably be feeling the pureblood wrath of Lady Black by now.

Hagrid urged the thestral to Diagon Alley, but they were too late. The stars were slowly winking out overhead as the earliest rays of the sun illuminated the highest atmosphere, and the Fireflies could not show their faces in sunlight. Hagrid wished he had simply come to London first, but Dumbledore had *told* him to try Bristol... ah, well, no point in looking back, he was here now and could only go forward. He took the thestral around the back of the Leaky Cauldron and put it in one of the few livery stalls that the tavern still maintained, then ordered both of them a hearty luncheon to be served in their respective quarters. Adding a handful of hot peppers to his lunch menu as an afterthought, Hagrid finally climbed wearily to his room, yanked the mattress from the too-small bed to the floor, and collapsed upon it in exhaustion.

Hagrid awoke when the delicious scent of potatoes and cutlets pried its way through his dreams. He felt quite muzzy-headed, but gladly opened the door for old Tom the innkeeper bearing his lunch tray. He set aside the peppers for the Fireflies, and ceased devouring his lunch only long enough to assure Tom's stablehand that yes, there really was an animal in the third stall, just leave him the food and don't even think of skiving off a bite for yourself.

Hagrid next checked on the thestral, planning to take a cautious stroll down Diagon Alley and see if any news of the Potters had reached the general Wizarding public. He was quite stunned to find that not only had the story spread, it had acquired details that Dumbledore had never mentioned: that Voldemort himself had attacked the Potters and *been killed*, and that little Harry had survived. Hagrid began to wonder if he'd been talking in his sleep--how had all these people learned about Harry? He was afraid to stop and press anyone for details; he'd been told to keep quiet and he knew painfully well that he would spill the beans if he engaged anyone in conversation.

Not that it would have mattered, really, he thought to himself; everyone in the Alley seemed to know the whole story--up until the moment he and Sirius Black had entered the scene. He overheard two Ministry employees at a tea shop discussing how Lily and James were found in the destroyed house (though they had many little details incorrect), but no mention of the missing body that had been dragged off. It slowly dawned on Hagrid that the body must have been Voldemort's, a thought which threatened to bring his fine lunch back to the surface. *Perhaps he's not dead at all!* he thought, although everyone seemed so certain. But without a body, what proof was there?

On top of that, they were all raving about Harry's survival of the attack, yet no one mentioned Black or claimed to have seen Baby Harry at all. Hagrid grew more and more uneasy as the afternoon passed. How could they just swallow all this hogwash about You-Know-Who being killed when there wasn't a scrap of proof of it? Not to mention the part about Harry surviving, even though that *was* true--but whoever had started that rumor couldn't have known it was true...

... unless they'd been there in Godric's Hollow to watch all of the events unfold.

Hagrid suddenly felt as though a giant glowing target was affixed to his forehead. He scurried back up the Alley and into his room as quickly and discretely as a half-Giant could. He spent the rest of his day with the doors and shutters locked, his back pressed tightly into the corner of the room and his pink umbrella balanced at the ready on his knee.

The sun set around 4:30 and he waited another hour to let the Fireflies out of his handkerchief. They were glowing intensely orange and had not even finished their first peppers; McGonagall had truly outdone herself this time. Hagrid let them fly free in the room for a few moments to get their bearings, then set down to business.

He trimmed down the wick of the oil lamp on the nightstand until only a tiny blue wisp of flame remained, then removed the glass chimney. The Fireflies immediately came over and buzzed about the fire in concern; they instinctively tended any dimming flame as though it were a fallen comrade. Hagrid next pulled out the comb and waved it slowly about the wick, brushing it gently against the insects when they flew near until he was certain it had touched each of them at least once. Holding the comb very near the lamp, Hagrid suddenly raised the wick, restoring the flame to a warm yellow glow. The Fireflies hummed triumphantly, landed on the comb, and began to polish it lovingly with their front legs. Though their bottoms were bright, their heads were not particularly so; they assumed that the comb had rescued the flame and considered it a friend for life.

Now that Hagrid had their attention, he carefully submerged the comb in a tall glass of water (making sure he did not dampen the Fireflies in the process). The water would block it completely from their senses and they would soon become frantic, wondering where their new ally had gone. Hagrid raised the sash of the window just an inch, then cautiously crept downstairs to the stable and led out the thestral. The two of them watched carefully until the three Fireflies emerged from the window, circling one another in a luminous braid as they searched for the comb.

Now was the tricky part. Hagrid reckoned they would fly first to Grimmauld Place, and he was correct. A waste of time, but it couldn't be helped; they were very good at finding their "loved ones," but only because they were so utterly methodical in their search methods. Fortunately, they would recognize very quickly that Lady Black was irrevocably *not* the beloved comb they were seeking, and would immediately take it upon themselves to sniff out Sirius. Hagrid could only hope that no one else had used the comb, or that the Fireflies wouldn't waste the whole night exploring Hogwarts or Godric's Hollow or any other place Sirius had ever been.

The Fireflies bonked their hard little heads a dozen times on the glass panes of Lady Black's bedroom until that same house-elf opened it and pointed some sort of atomizer at them. They zipped away to a respectable distance and hovered, weaving around each other in an apparent intense discussion. The elf soon began to nod, undoubtedly realizing who they were looking for, and did not spray them with his atomizer. "You won't find what you want here," it rumbled softly to the Flies, who slowed their intricate dance. The elf cackled nastily and called, slightly louder, "Good hunting," then silently closed the window.

The Fireflies apparently understood the house-elf, for they immediately pulled into a close formation and headed off in a new direction. Hagrid knew they'd already begun to work at one of the other scents on the comb, hopefully that of Sirius Black. The thestral followed them without any urging, apparently enjoying the prospect of a scenic flight on a nice evening like this.

It took them over an hour to reach the house in Bristol, but Hagrid was relieved. He knew the Flies were certainly trailing the right person, and would now get a much stronger whiff of Black's scent or magnetism or whatever it was they followed. It was now only a matter of catching up to Black; if he hadn't left the country, Hagrid should make it to Privet Drive in time.

The Fireflies resumed their tight formation and began racing to the northwest. With a good solid scent to guide them, they traveled at considerable speed--the Muggles below would believe them a shooting star. To the thestral, however, this was barely a canter, and it kept pace with them easily. After nearly another hour, Hagrid began to wonder if they were heading for Ireland, but the Fireflies presently descended over Gwynedd in Wales. That made sense; the homeland of Taliesin the Bard was packed with sorcerors, perhaps even outnumbering the Muggles. Hagrid knew the story of Taliesin by heart; the Bard's mother had been a witch and his father (well, stepfather, to be more precise) a giant.

There was not a light to be seen where the Fireflies were heading. They soon reached the treetops of a dense forest, which proved a bit of a challenge for the larger travelers. Once again Hagrid silently thanked McGonagall for her excellent Transfiguration; her peppers had turned the Fireflies' bottoms into miniature lighthouses, enabling him to spot them even after he and his mount had struggled to the ground through the boughs.

There was Black, sitting beside his motorbike in a small clearing with his back against a giant stump, and the little bundle that must be Harry in his arms. The Fireflies had already landed on Black's arm and were presumably cuddling him affectionately, but he made no effort to brush them away. Hagrid realized that Black was asleep. The young man looked terrible, with streaks of tears traced all through the dust and grime on his face. Even though Hagrid was careful to make no sound, Black started awake as Hagrid approached, already raising his wand.

"All right there, Black? It's jus' me, Hagrid."

"How did--oh." Black's wand was pointing directly at him, but the young man was looking at the Fireflies on his forearm. "Are you alone?" Black asked in a slightly less belligerent tone.

"Jus' me, an' me thestral," Hagrid announced cautiously. "Mind if I come over to yeh?"

Black nodded, dropping his defensive posture; even from a distance Hagrid could see he was exhausted and pale. Hagrid came up and sat beside him, immediately fumbling through his pockets for something to eat. He turned up a nice dinner roll from the Halloween feast, but Black waved it away with a grimace.

"No, thanks, Hagrid, I have food, I just can't eat yet. I'm too sick about what's happened." He kissed little Harry's forehead as the tot began to stir from all the chattering.

"We're all sick about it," agreed Hagrid. "Though there's a lot o' rumors goin' roun' about what happened back in the Hollow."

"I know what happened," said Sirius Black dully, but he did not elaborate.

Hagrid debated whether to press him for details, but he had one assignment from Dumbledore: to retrieve the baby. It was getting late, and he didn't want to disappoint the Headmaster by showing up late for the meeting. He decided to try a direct approach.

"Listen, Black, Dumbledore's asked me ter come an' fetch little Harry there, an' I have to say, yeh don't look like you're up teh carin' for him at the mo'."

Black closed his eyes tightly and pressed his mouth against Harry's fuzzy head. He was clearly in agony; tears began to spill down his cheeks. His voice was still dull when he spoke, however, as though he had already cried so much that his throat had no remaining capacity for grief. "I don't want to let him go, Hagrid. He needs me. I'm the only one in the world who knows him."

"Yer a mess, Black," said Hagrid gently. "Yeh look like yeh got one foot in the grave an' the other on a banana peel. You know Dumbledore'll take good care of the lad. Don't yeh think he's better off safe in the castle than out here alone in the woods wi' you? Let me take him back to the Headmaster, put 'im down in a nice, cozy bed tonight. We'll figure out what ter do with him tomorrow. Or the next day. If what they're sayin' is true, he's not gonna want for nothin'."

Black continued to nuzzle Harry's head for some time, but his face gradually relaxed. "I don't want to give him up, Hagrid," he finally said. "But you're right. There's something I need to take care of, and little Harry can't go with me." He paused briefly, then continued in a firmer tone. "Did you say you came here on a thestral?"

"I did," said Hagrid. "He's over there... ah, no he's not, hang on." Hagrid leapt to his feet; he hadn't tethered the beast this time, and it was already sneaking off. "Get back here, you!" He stomped into the brush and caught the errant thestral by the tail. "Shame on yeh, tryin' ter run off. After all the nice food I give yeh, an' let yeh see the sights..." The beast lowered its head and tail meekly and trotted after Hagrid, a guilty look in its hollow white eyes.

Black almost managed a smile as Hagrid led the beast into the clearing. He stood up awkwardly, trying not to jostle the baby. "Give me the lead, Hagrid, I could use a ride that's fast and silent. You take my motorbike and bring Harry to Dumbledore. Harry likes it, the sound seems to soothe him a little." Black stopped, looking down at the baby stirring in his arms. "I'll come find you as soon as I can, sproggie," he said in a shaking voice, then handed Harry off to Hagrid.

"He'll be okay," said Hagrid, a little shakily himself. "I'll see to him an' then I'll bring yer bike back to yer place in Bristol."

Black shook his head grimly; his face had transformed into a mask of hard determination. "Keep it. I won't be needing it anymore." Black bent forward to kiss Harry's forehead one last time, then raised his wand and performed an enlargement charm on the motorbike so it would fit Hagrid. He turned his back, leapt gracefully onto the thestral, and launched into the starlit sky without another word.

Hagrid had never ridden a motorbike, but he was always game to try something new. It was a bit awkward, settling onto the machine and figuring out the levers and knobs with the baby in his hand, particularly since the child decided it was a fine time to wake up and experiment with pulling on Hagrid's beard. Hagrid quickly handed Harry the dinner roll, which produced the desired effect; the tot began to gnaw it cheerfully, filling the beard with soggy crumbs. It kept him from squirming too much, and Hagrid was able to suss out the keys, throttle, and brakes until he felt ready to ride the chopper. He stuffed the now sticky baby into his shirt as Sirius had done the night before, leaving Harry's head poking out through his beard, started the motorbike, and took to the air. Little Harry kept gnawing on the roll as though he didn't have a care in the world.

*A/N: This chapter is the first to really challenge Canon. I want to explain the "missing 24 hours" between the destruction of the Potter household and the arrival of Hagrid on Privet Drive to meet Dumbledore and give Harry to the Dursleys.*

*How DID the Wizarding World know about Voldy's demise? In Book 1, people spent the whole next day celebrating and talking about the Boy Who Lived--but per Canon, Hagrid had slipped off and disappeared with Baby Harry before anyone, Muggle or Wizard, arrived at the scene of the destruction. Per Canon, Hagrid and Sirius appear to be the only ones who knew Harry had survived, yet Vernon Dursley saw wizards celebrating that fact as he drove to work the next morning. And it was taken for granted as FACT, not a mere rumor.*

*Would the entire Wizard population believe a half-giant's blathering that a baby had killed Voldemort? Probably not. Would the Death Eaters have eagerly publicized the fact that their master had been killed by a baby? Probably not. Sirius Black was popular and charismatic enough that he could have convinced the Wizard World about Harry and Voldemort. But if Sirius had done so, he would be lauded as a hero in wizard society--and there would have been plenty of public skepticism when, two days later, Sirius was jailed for mass murder. If nothing else, you KNOW the pundits at The Prophet would never forget that the "Messenger of the Most Wonderful News" turned around and slaughtered Peter Pettigrew within 48 hours, yet that is never brought up in Prisoner of Azkaban. It seems unlikely that Sirius had spread the word, either.*

*Who does that leave? Who knew Voldy had gone to Godric's Hollow to slay the Potters? Who knew Harry had survived, when he was not found by either police or Aurors at the scene? How did they know that Harry hadn't simply been kidnapped (or body-snatched)? For that matter, how did they know Voldy had been present, and been killed? There's never any mention of Voldy's cadaver in Canon--as though it was never found. Given the widespread distrust and schisms in wizard society, how on Earth was EVERYONE convinced, within hours of the event, that Voldy was dead and Harry had killed him?*

*Finally, Canon tells us that McGonagall waited, in cat form, at Privet Drive that whole next day, until Dumbledore showed up at midnight to meet Hagrid and Baby Harry. She admitted that Hagrid had told her about this planned meeting. Recall that McGonagall asked Dumbles if it was true that Harry had killed Voldemort and survived. Ergo, Hagrid did not have Baby Harry with him when he tipped off McGonagall. If Harry wasn't with Hagrid, where was he? Hagrid either left Baby Harry ALONE somewhere, or he'd given Harry to someone else. It seems obvious that Sirius must have taken his godson during those intervening hours.*

*More mysteries unfold--what was Sirius up to for the next 24 hours? Why does Hagrid recall going to the Hollow and retrieving Baby Harry immediately and bringing him straight to Dumbledore on Privet Drive (when the timing of events proves that is clearly impossible)? How did the rest of Wizard Society find out so quickly about Harry being alive--or about Voldemort and the Potters being killed, for that matter--if the only witness to the act was Baby Harry? Clearly there is more to Canon than meets the eye, and I'm having great fun figuring out an explanation. I hope you are as well, dear reader.*

~F7

## 15: Mysteries Afloat

Chapter 15 of 50

Hagrid's recollections of the night in question don't quite jibe with what he learned in Godric's Hollow. A bit of exploration ensues. Harry introduces the DADA professor to Quidditch. He learns something new about her, as well.



Harry didn't interrupt Hagrid as he poured out his tale of the Halloween night when the Potters were killed, though Ron asked occasional questions. Harry simply remained slumped in the chair, gazing off blankly as though he weren't listening at all, or even capable of listening for that matter. About midway through the story, Harry finally developed the motivation to sit up more comfortably; as Hagrid had surmised, he simply wasn't concerned about anything as mundane as a wry neck prior to that.

"I heard the Muggles comin' closer, so I had to leave yer poor mum an' get back out to Sirius. I tol' him yeh'd be better off in a cozy bed in the castle, an' we could settle out the details later, 'cause I din't know at the time that Dumbledore was givin' yeh to the Dursleys an' all. Sirius jus' kept huggin' yeh and sayin', 'Yer right, but I don' wanna give him up, I'm all he's got now,' along them lines. An' he said he had to take care of summat and did I, did I... did I want ter take the motorbike to bring yeh back to Hogwarts. He said he din't need it anymore." Hagrid scowled and scratched his head. "There was another thing but I can't think of it at the mo... at the mo." He jumped with a shiver. "Scuse me, Harry, I think someone jus' stepped over me grave."

Harry's eyes were still blank, but his voice contained a hint of his usual demeanor. "Keep going, Hagrid, please."

Hagrid frowned again as he collected his thoughts. "Well, that was mostly it, I reckon. Sirius gave yer little head a big kiss g'bye an' did a charm on the bike so's it'd fit me,

an' he took off. I spent a few seconds figurin' out how to start an' stop the bloody thing, then I buzzed off to Privet Drive an' handed yeh to Dumbledore."

Ron began to fidget in his seat uncomfortably. He glanced between Harry and Hagrid. Ron knew very well that this story did not agree with the reports from the Gamidges or Uther. Yet Ron also knew that Hagrid was an inept liar, and he was not showing any of his usual giveaways when he fibbed. Either Hagrid believed this story, or within the last half hour he'd developed a talent for deception that had eluded him all his life.

Harry said nothing for some time, just stared blankly at Hagrid. Ron wondered what he might be thinking. It was rather like a picture he'd seen once, in a Muggle book in his Dad's old office: a black and white image of a fancy candlestick, but if you stared at it long enough, it suddenly became a white-and-black image of two faces (knowing that Muggle pictures didn't move, that effect had impressed Ron greatly). One minute Harry looked as though he would shout at Hagrid in rage, then he would suddenly appear deeply hurt, or on the verge of cynical laughter--all the while never moving a muscle. Ron began to hope Harry would just snap out of the trance and get the confrontation over and done.

"You're certain it happened as you said, Hagrid?" Harry finally said quietly.

"Tha's all I can remember, Harry. It was a long time ago, an' for years I thought Sirius was a traitor; did me bes' teh forget parts of it. Thought all his tears an' kisses for yeh were a big act, that sort o' thing." Hagrid settled back in his chair and took a relaxed draught of his tea.

"When you carried me out," Harry said slowly, "was my scar on my head?"

Hagrid glanced up in confusion. "Well, in a manner o' speakin--it was a wound still, yeh'd just got it, after all."

"A wound," said Harry. "Was it bleeding?"

"O' course. It was on yer head, after all; head wounds tend ter bleed pretty heavy."

"Yes," agreed Harry. "Think hard, Hagrid. When Sirius kissed me goodbye, did he get any blood on his face?"

Hagrid frowned hard, clearly put off by the very concept. "Not as I remember," he said, eyeing Harry quizzically.

"And when you handed me to Dumbledore, was there still blood on my head?"

Hagrid's jaw dropped, quickly followed by his shoulders; he began to shift his weight in the chair as though the seat had suddenly sprouted thorns. "I... I don't really... I don't think so, Harry. No. It was... it was already dry. Scabbed over." Hagrid passed the point of squirming and jumped up from his chair to pace. "It was dry an' all washed off, even yer little face was all wiped clean. But I didn't... I don't remember tidyin'... Aw, Sirius musta done it, he musta cleaned you up an' did some sorta healing charm..." Hagrid's voice drained away; Sirius might have had the presence of mind to try Healing the baby, but he was in no state to bother washing Harry's face.

"Did you speak to Professor McGonagall that night, Hagrid?" asked Harry.

"Did I?" Hagrid croaked. Fuzzy slippers and the scent of cucumber salad flashed through his mind, but it seemed to be part of another memory, unrelated... or was it? "Did I?" he asked again.

"We've all heard the story," said Ron. "McGonagall spent a whole day spying outside the Dursleys' house, Transfigured as a cat. She's always said that you told her you'd be meeting Dumbledore on Privet Drive at midnight."

Hagrid began to twist strands of his beard between fingers and thumb of both hands. "Well, now, tha's just impossible, innit, Ron? Harry? I din' know meself about the meetin' till Dumbledore sent me ter the Hollow, an' I came right from there to... to Privet Drive." He sat down suddenly, burying his face in his hands and rubbing his forehead firmly. "I went straight ter Privet Drive on the motorbike, an' the both of them were there, Dumbledore an' McGonagall, an' she even mentioned she'd spent the whole day there as a cat..." Hagrid dropped his hands to his lap, turning pale and wide eyed. "But she couldn't've, could she? Because none of us ever heard about Privet Drive 'til late tha' night, af'er the attack. Besides, she was at the Halloween Feast, the elves *told* me, they'd fixed her the special pumpkin tarts she likes an' I fed the leftovers to the unicorns just before I went ter Dumbledore's office."

"You said you met Dumbledore at the main doors of the castle," said Ron gently.

"I did!" blustered Hagrid, growing agitated. "I met him in the blasted rain on the steps... but I also went to his... office? Din't I?"

"Come here to me, Hagrid," said Harry, with such command that it turned Ron's blood to ice water. Hagrid looked frightened, but he shuffled haltingly to Harry, who motioned him to sit on the floor.

"I think you believe what you have said, Hagrid," said Harry, finally focusing his gaze on the bearded, anxious face of the half-giant. "But I also think your memory has been compromised. I would know the truth, Hagrid. Forgive me for this." Without another word, Harry set his hand upon Hagrid's forehead and deliberately stepped into his mind.

Harry had seen a modified memory before, in Dumbledore's Penseive. Slughorn's reconfiguration of his talk with Tom Riddle about Horcruxes had been carelessly done, with an obvious substitution spliced over the part he wanted to hide. But whoever had altered Hagrid's memory had created a masterpiece. It was meticulous and detailed enough for Hagrid himself to mistake it for the truth for sixteen years. But although it had been done with exquisite attention to detail, it wasn't flawless, and despite Harry's rather limited experience as a Legilimagus, he knew this memory wasn't the genuine article.

Harry rolled through the events over and over, seeing points of discontinuity. Sirius's face went from clean to dirty to clean again. The background subtly changed from the pile of industrial rubble to what appeared to be a tree trunk. Sirius had disappeared abruptly, but there had been no crack of Apparation, no broom, no Portkey, no transformation into a mastiff, no *footsteps*. Like Everett Gamidge and the Ministry automobile, Hagrid might not be able to *recall* little details like the sound of steps or Apparating, but they should still *be* there in the province of weaker dendrites, a background detail too insignificant to drag into consciousness. However Sirius had departed, it had been clipped from Hagrid's memory with surgical precision.

Harry moved beyond the meeting on Privet Drive to the next day, and the next. His parents had been killed on a Monday night. Hagrid's imprint of the following days were dim, but present: he had returned to Hogwarts right after dropping off Baby Harry, and woke up tired but ready to work on Wednesday morning. There was no indication that Tuesday ever happened.

Harry had no idea how to break past the alteration, or if it were even possible. He was certain now that it was no fault of Hagrid's that his recollections of that time did not agree with eyewitness accounts. What Harry did *not* know was exactly whom had modified Hagrid's memory, what had happened during those missing twenty-four hours, or why any of this was done in the first place.

For the first time, Harry felt completely in control of his presence in another mind. He chose to pursue this one line of inquiry, and chose to step out without delving into any other train of thought. Which proved to be an excellent decision, as Ron was frantically attempting to break his connection to Hagrid, covering Harry's eyes with one hand and shaking his shoulders violently with the other.

"Please stop that, Ron," croaked Harry. His voice sounded so warped it startled Harry himself, despite a whole new layer of chilling calm enveloping him.

"Blimey, Harry!" roared Ron. "I thought you were at death's door, mate!" Harry could still see his friend's wild eyes, but once again slipped deep into the strange waking coma and could not answer. By then Hagrid had recovered his senses and put a somewhat shaky hand on Ron's shoulder.

"It's over now, Ron, he's done. It's okay," said Hagrid. "It's just as well, now yeh've seen him go gray like that, you'll be ready for it nex' time." Hagrid patted Ron and



slumped back against the leg of the table wearily.

Harry heard the words and agreed completely, but he felt so light and unencumbered that he didn't even try to speak.

Harry woke up in his four-poster before the break of dawn. He remembered the night before: the farce of Hagrid attempting to put on the Invisibility Cloak and Ron's comment about being half the giant he used to be; the way they rolled him up, unresisting, in his cloak like a burrito; Hagrid practicing for twenty minutes, walking with Harry draped along his arm so that he would not appear to be holding anything; Ron tirelessly coaching him to say the line, "Just havin' a meetin' with one of my prefects, Mr. Filch." They'd pulled it off, even though Hagrid had slipped up and said "two of my prefects" when Filch inspected him, but apparently Hagrid's new status as a Head of House afforded even more leniency in Filch's eye. Ron had used the *Levicorpus* spell to haul Harry through Gryffindor tower after they made it to the Fat Lady. Aside from Hermione getting ruffled about their absence from her Charms homework session, the whole evening went off without a hitch.

Harry had focused enough to thank Ron for bringing him upstairs, then fell into a dreamless sleep. It was restful and refreshing, but unfortunately it took place about three hours before his normal bedtime. Hence Harry woke up far too early, with no desire to doze. Naturally, his thoughts turned immediately to Quidditch.

Fawkes warbled softly as Harry took up his Firebolt, but didn't seem interested in accompanying him for a flight. *Probably wants to sleep some more*, Harry thought with a chuckle, and sure enough, as he softly pulled the dormitory door shut behind him, he glanced back to catch the end of a wide-beaked yawn.

He saw no one else, not even Mrs. Norris, as he slipped silently through the castle. Harry hopped on his broom as soon as he escaped through the oak front doors, gliding casually down to the pitch. Stopping at the dressing rooms to don his practice robes, he took a handful of Snitches from the captains' locker and set out to greet the sunrise with a few rounds of none-on-one.

The practice Snitches were, by definition, in too poor condition to use in matches, having become mangled over time in various irreparable ways. One had pretty much lost all its usefulness after losing half a wing; ironically, that had happened after a practice when two Bludgers, frantic to avoid being confined in their box, suddenly smashed themselves together on the fingers of the person carrying them (everyone knew it was a mistake to handle both Bludgers at once, but people tried to save time every now and then). McClaggen had also been carrying the Snitch at the time, and the little thing was crushed in mid-flap. When he attempted to straighten the wing, it had simply snapped off along the crease, prompting Madam Hooch to lecture the entire team on the relative costs of Snitches, Bludgers, and finger splints. At any rate, the practice Snitches could still get around the field, more or less, and Harry really just wanted an excuse to fly.

The sun crept rather quickly over the horizon, turning to gold the tops of the castle towers, then slowly descending to reflect from the many windows. Owls swooped past Harry on their way to roost after a night's hunting; Harry had to chase one down after it snapped up a Snitch in its talons, undoubtedly mistaking it for a potential bedtime snack. It was not eager to part with its prize, and a number of other owls regarded Harry's rescue mission with great disapproval. Fortunately, the broken Snitch put up its own fight, scraping the owl's toes with its broken wing. The owl finally gave up, dropping the Snitch with an outraged screech. Harry reckoned he'd bring something up to the Owlery from breakfast, just for the sake of keeping the peace.

Chasing five different Snitches was a pleasant exercise in concentration and speed, and the otherwise empty airspace was an ideal environment in which to do it. Harry was thoroughly enjoying himself when the silence was shattered by an unidentifiable squawking from one of the grandstands around the pitch. At first he thought it was a great row among rival gangs of crows, but the sounds were a bit too prosaic for mere cawing. Harry swooped over the top of the bleachers to investigate the source of the sounds, with a most unexpected result.

"What the Sam Hill is this thing?" Ondossi had switched from her glottal native tongue to English as soon as she saw Harry, but she did not adjust the volume at all; her question came as a shriek. She was sprawled awkwardly on a plywood platform about a meter below a net hammock, which was swinging rather wildly over her head. With one hand gripping the edge of the platform, she was frantically swatting at the broken Snitch, which dodged in and out of her reach with obvious cheerful sportsmanship. Harry laughed so hard he was forced to land on the platform to catch his breath.

"Gee, thanks, pal," she grouched at Harry, still attempting to smack the Snitch as though it were a pesky fly. "Did you sic this thing on me?"

"No, I swear, it wasn't me. Although I wish I'd arranged for you to meet it sooner, that was the funniest thing I've seen all week!"

She turned her attention from the Snitch to point an accusing finger at him. "If this develops into a regular occurrence, bucko, you are hosed. Got it?"

"Is that good or bad?" Harry asked, unable to keep a straight face. He leapt effortlessly back onto his Firebolt and captured the offending Snitch, dangling it by the unbroken wing so Tura could take a close look. She peered at it intensely.

"Is that a machine of some kind?" she finally asked.

"Let me guess. You've never heard of Quidditch," said Harry, shaking his head.

Ondossi furrowed her brow. "I have too. That's that game, isn't it?"

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. "It's *asport*."

"Whatever. You're supposed to hit that thing with a bat, right? Through a hoop?" Harry winced. This was worse than a nightmare. Well, it looked like Hermione would finally have someone equally disinterested to talk to during matches.

"Not exactly," Harry muttered.

She reared backward as the Snitch attempted to flutter toward her; it had not received much attention since its injury, and it clearly considered her attempts to clobber it as a positive gesture. "I think it likes you," said Harry playfully, holding it at arms' length toward her. She glared at him suspiciously, but stopped cringing and leaned her head over the platform for a closer look. She finally reached out to pat the broken wing, leaping back with a shudder when the Snitch flapped energetically.

"Yuck," she said. "It feels like a big bug."

"I can tell we won't be debating the finer points of Quidditch any time soon," grumbled Harry. "Uh, Tura? What in the name of Merlin are you doing up in the rafters of the Quidditch bleachers? And is that a *sack* you're wearing?" Now that the hysteria of the Great Snitch Attack had worn off, Harry realized there was a whole new level of absurdity to explore.

"Don't be dissin' the sack," she said, again leaving Harry amazed by her ability to speak his native tongue in ways that meant absolutely nothing to him. "It happens to be very comfy. I got it from a big cargo vessel down in Anchorage. It came all the way from Colombia! Here, sniff." She crunched up some of the fabric at her shoulder and waved him over. "It used to have coffee beans in it. Go to bed and smell the coffee!" She giggled.

It definitely smelled like coffee. "Yeah, that's nice," said Harry politely. "But why are you wearing it--up here in the rafters?"

"Hey, hotshot, this happens to be my bedroom." She sat back, patting the platform and waving in invitation for him to land again. "Grawpy built it for me! It's a bit, um, high up, but Hagrid thought I shouldn't sleep too close to the ground outside."

"Right," said Harry, taking a seat on the plywood. "But why are you sleeping outside in the first place?"

"Geez Louise, Harry. I can't stay in the castle with the dream broadcasting going on. People will hate me! It wasn't so bad on the tundra, the dreams just kinda soaked into the Earth."

"My nightmares don't wake everybody else up," noted Harry.

"Well aren't you clever?" she snapped. "Maybe they will in a few years--it's fairly common among Legilimagi. I can usually keep it under control, but since I came here, they've been breaking through."

"Because of the stones?" asked Harry.

Her face wrinkled up with dismay, and she pulled her knees up inside her coffee sack. "No," she said, then looked up at him with great sorrow. "I'm just falling apart, I think." She began to hunt around on the platform, finally taking up a strip of black cloth and tying it around her eyes. "Sorry, the sun's too bright already," she said, though Harry suspected she was crying behind the blindfold.

"Tura." Harry had no idea what to say, but unless Grawp came by, he was definitely on his own under the circumstances. "Do you miss Northpole?" he finally stammered.

"No. Well, yes, I do, but that's not it. I just never imagined how hard this would be. To be around so many people all the time. To have to *talk* all day, answer questions. I'm so tired all the time--and it's only the first week! It's not the Occlumency," she added, as though guessing his next question. "I can do that in my sleep. Literally. But I'm not cut out to be a teacher, Harry."

Harry frowned. "You're doing quite well, Tura. Lots of people say they like your class."

She shrugged. "I just copied the style of a teacher in Northpole that everybody liked. It seems to work. But it takes a lot out of me--I'm not like that, Harry! I don't *talk* to people! I *avoid* people! I feel like I can barely drag myself up that pole for bed after classes." She paused a moment as the absurdity of that statement sank in; she and Harry both chuckled. "I haven't given you any lessons either, Harry," she continued dolefully, "and that's more important than all this DADA doo-doo."

"Yeah, well, I was beginning to wonder...but Tura, the Defense lessons *are* important. Look at Elias--he doesn't know the first thing about defense. People need to learn how to challenge Voldemort--"

"Challenge him?" Tura spat, cutting Harry off. "No one can challenge him but you, Harry. You know that!" Though her eyes were hidden behind the black band, she turned toward him and he could feel her angry glare. "All these people have one defense, Harry, *one*: YOU. All the rest is just duct tape and bailing wire. All the time I'm wasting showing them how to save themselves from dementors--that's all time I could have spent getting you ready to face the Dark Lord." She erupted once more into her native tongue, in what Harry could only guess was an angry invective. It ended with a sudden burst of tears.

Shaking his head at Ondossi's ability to switch moods faster than Vernon Dursley could change the television channels with his remote controller, Harry patted her back uncertainly until she settled down again. Two large wet crescents stained her blindfold when she turned her head toward him again.

"Harry, you have to understand, I've been waiting years for you to confront him. Everyone has--at least everyone who knew about the Prophecy, that is. Every year, every hour, every *minute* of delay is precious time wasted. Lives lost, pain, suffering, all that...just so I can teach Elias Ravenclaw how to stop a dementor that might never come for him at all. Or worse, for you to skate around on your broom catching mechanical bugs."

Harry's stomach lurched most uncomfortably. Ondossi abruptly stopped speaking, then lowered her head.

"I'm sorry, Harry. That was totally unfair--you're still a kid, for Pete's sake. You know, in America, wizards don't even come of age until eighteen. It's an outrage--you didn't do anything to put Lord Voldemort in power, and yet everyone's impatient for you to come along and clean up the mess. Including me. I told Dumbledore two years ago that I'd make you my apprentice, you know. During your fifth year at Hogwarts, when he began to suspect you were a Legilimagus. I told him to send you to me and let me hone you into a weapon. I even said I'd go to Hogwarts if you didn't want to leave. He said, 'No way, Jose.' I nearly had a cow. I even went over his head and talked to your guardian."

Harry sat up straight. "You met Sirius?"

"Ugh. Not really. What a fiasco. I had to find out who he was, then find *him*, in his Unplottable house with the Fidelius charm. It was worse than tracking a lowbush moose in a blizzard. Then I finally get the address, buy the Floo powder, borrow a fireplace since my woodstove is too small to put my head in. After all that, wouldn't you know, he'd apparently just talked to *you* in the Floo and was on a rampage."

Harry's stomach sank, recalling that rushed conversation with Sirius and Lupin in Dolores Umbridge's office. Harry had already known that Sirius was livid afterward--he had threatened to come up to Hogwarts right then and give Snape a piece of his mind. "I remember that day. Sirius was quite upset. But he would have *wanted* you to teach me--he was angry because he'd just found out that... my former Occlumency teacher had stopped the lessons."

"Yeah, he mentioned that. Loudly. He thought it was a little too coincidental that five minutes later I was there, offering to teach you. He seemed to think I was the Dark Lord's secretary or something."

Harry pictured Sirius turning back to the Floo with Lupin practically restraining him, to find an unknown witch with a strange accent asking about Occlumency. It wasn't a pretty sight. "I see what you mean. You're probably lucky he didn't try to pull you through."

"I think he would have if there hadn't been an entire planet between us," Tura agreed. "So that was it for Black, but Remus Lupin was there too, and he was a little more reasonable. He let me explain who I was and what I wanted. But I also mentioned that I wanted to get you ready to face Lord Voldemort, and that was the end of that."

"Remus turned you down?" said Harry skeptically. "Without even asking Sirius, or me?" That didn't seem like something Lupin would do.

Ondossi sighed. "That's my point. He said you had just Floored because of some teen angst issue and before you went off to get killed, he'd like you to have a shot at growing up first."

She gave Harry a wan smile, then continued. "Well, he didn't say it quite like *that*. But that was what Dumbledore was trying to tell me, and I finally got it: that the world could take care of itself for a while before demanding that you step up and save it. So I crawled back under my rock and waited. As it should be."

Harry rolled that idea around in his mind for a while. "No. I think you were right in the first place, Tura. People have died because I've been out playing Quidditch and dancing at weddings--"

"NO!" she shouted, cutting him off again. "People have died because Lord Voldemort is a monster, not because you need time to grow up just like everybody else. Your real magic is just now developing, Harry. Rushing it would've been a grave mistake. Rushing it now would be a mistake! Maybe it's just as well that you had a week off; it probably gave you a chance to grow into what you've learned."

Harry pursed his lips. "I did make some progress this week." He described both readings with Ron, and how he'd read Hagrid. Ondossi's brows poked up over the blindfold at the latter.

"Wow. Hagrid's like an Occlumens with me. You didn't have any trouble?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, then remembered rather sheepishly that she couldn't see. "No, it was just like anyone else. But I found out his memory has been modified. I rather hoped you might know a way to get around that, actually."

Now her forehead wrinkled into a scowl above the blindfold. "Really? Giants tend to resist magical influences like that. It must have been somebody good. Hmph." She

began tapping her fingers on the platform and chewing on the inside of her lip. Harry smiled; her concern for Hagrid was rather touching. With the two of them looking after one another, they ought to be the safest people on Earth.

"Let's go have a word with Mr. Hagrid after breakfast," she said, still drumming her fingers uneasily. She stood up and began walking toward a thick vertical beam, but as she was still blindfolded, Harry's feet and palms suddenly tingled in consternation.

"Eh, uh, Tura," he sputtered, leaping to his feet, "no offense, but you're going to break your neck going down that pole in your blindfold. Come here, we'll take the easy way." Harry steered her by the shoulders to the open side of the platform, then picked up his Firebolt. He wasn't quite sure how to put a second rider on it; this was a sports broom, designed for performance, not passengers. If he put her in front, it would be rather difficult to hold the handle, yet if she was behind him, she could conceivably fall off--with that blindfold on, she wouldn't be able to anticipate any bumps or swerves. Well, it wasn't like this was a speed trial; all he wanted to do was ferry her up to the castle. He would just have to take it slow.

"Very good, then, come up behind me," he instructed, stepping between her and the edge of the platform and carefully maneuvering the broomstick between her feet. He was a bit worried about tripping her, but as always, the Firebolt wriggled efficiently into the proper position. Harry legged over the broomstick, relying on it to hover as he reached behind and put Ondossi's hands around his waist. "Hold on tight now!" He kicked off from the platform rather sluggishly, not certain how the unusual weight distribution would affect the broom's performance. Harry was marveling at the fact that the Firebolt flew almost as smoothly with two as it did with him alone, when Ondossi suddenly squeezed him so hard his vision dimmed for an instant.

"What are you doing?" she howled, which was exactly what Harry intended to ask her as soon as he could inflate his lungs again. "Are we flying? Put me down! Put me down! Down! Down! Down!" Harry had to let go of the broomstick to pry her hands from the death-grip on his abdomen. That only made her shriek louder, and despite her insistence upon descending, she launched herself *up* toward his shoulders, as though putting as much cushion between herself and the ground as possible. Fortunately, his Firebolt saved him again; it glided over the grounds toward the castle at a gentle angle of its own accord, leaving him free to grapple with the squalling lunatic attempting to climb onto his head.

The broomstick alighted gracefully at the foot of the stone steps, but the same could not be said for Harry and his reluctant passenger. Once Harry's feet touched the ground, the levitation spells on the Firebolt released them, and suddenly Harry's right shoulder was bearing her full weight. Amazingly, she landed on her feet, more or less, while he was knocked flat onto the lawn. Harry opted to just lay there a moment, breathing in the moist, rich scent of grass and soil that smelled nothing like coffee. He felt as though he'd just tried to stuff a giant octopus into a tin can.

Ondossi was breathing hard, but that was a hands-down improvement from the shrieking in his ear. She stood rock still for a moment as though confirming that she was, in fact, on terra firma once more. "We made it!" she finally bubbled. "I *flew*!!"

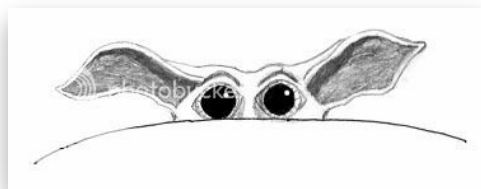
Harry groaned. That must have been her first broom ride; she was still breaking in her *wand*, for Merlin's sake. "Yes. Aren't you clever," he mumbled, still easing his lungs back into the space from which they were so rudely evicted.

"Harry?" she said in a childlike voice of hope and wonder. "Can we do that again?"

## 16: Untangling the Web

*Chapter 16 of 50*

With some effort, Hagrid's real story is unlocked. Harry wants more than ever to hear Sirius Black's side of the story, and develops a plan to that end.



There was little hope of an inconspicuous entrance after Ondossi caterwauled the entire length of the grounds, but fortunately the Great Hall had just opened for breakfast and only a few groggy faces had pressed against the windows for the spectacle. Hagrid's was among them, and Harry could hear his great booming laughter long before he threw open the oaken doors of the entrance hall.

To Harry's surprise, however, Ondossi was nowhere to be found. He had closed his eyes but a few seconds, groaning inwardly at the ribbing he knew was soon to come, and in that time she had simply vanished. Harry tapped his pocket reflexively for his Invisibility cloak, wondering if she might have nicked it, but it was there. He considered donning it himself, but he knew quite well that his entrance was expected, and the cloak was still a secret from the rest of the student body. Grunting in displeasure at Tura's mysterious, if timely, escape, Harry gritted his teeth and went inside to face the cheers and jeers.

Hagrid nearly plowed him over, rushing out the oak front doors just as Harry stepped in. "All right, Harry!" he bellowed heartily, clapping Harry on the shoulder enthusiastically but delicately. "Tha' was the funnies' thing I've seen in ages. Dunno how yeh got her on it, she's scared to death of flying."

Harry smiled grimly and nodded, feeling it unnecessary to acknowledge that obvious fact. He grinned and waved to one and all who aimed a loud remark at him, regardless of the content; playing it cool seemed the best approach at this point. He plopped into a red chair at an empty table and promptly wolfed down an entire loaf of toast and jam. Hermione presently sauntered in, grinning smugly at him. "The view from the girls' dormitory is simply amazing," was, thankfully, all she said about it.

Ron, it turned out, had filled Hermione in about their meeting with Hagrid, and she was quite interested in tagging along. Harry intercepted Hagrid as the professor headed out of the Hall, and Hermione followed from her neighboring table, snatching a scone for the road. On the way to Hagrid's cabin, Harry explained his *other* encounter with Ondossi that morning, and that she might be able to recover Hagrid's original memory. Hagrid frowned. "Gee, Harry, whoever did it--erased the memory, that is--might'a had a bloody good reason for it, eh? 'Specially if it was as tough ter do as Tura says."

They had reached the cabin at that point and were immediately aware of a considerable commotion coming from inside. Fang seemed to be both barking and laughing. Hagrid threw open the door in alarm, but it was only Ondossi once again; she and Fang were rough-housing on the floor, each looking most entertained by the process. "Hi, Hagrid," she chirped, attempting to get Fang into a sort of half-nelson. Fang simply put his head under her belly and flipped her off her feet.

"Hey, now, easy aroun' the new furniture," said Hagrid, though his beetle-black eyes sparkled cheerfully.

Hagrid had to shove Fang outside to restore some peace in the cabin, and the mood sombered immediately as they sat down to discuss the issue again. "I'm sure there was an important reason," said Hermione, "but Hagrid, without knowing who did it, we can't know if it was a good reason or a bad reason." Hagrid's jaw fell at that comment; apparently it had not occurred to him that his memory might have been modified by someone with ill intent.

Ondossi chewed her lip again. "I don't like this, Hagrid. Someone took the truth from you and left a lie. And not on just any old thing--on one of the most significant events of this era. Even if it was for 'your own good,' as they say, it's your truth, your knowledge. I'd like to look for it." She gazed up at Hagrid, genuine concern in her empty black eyes.

"But yeh've always said yeh can't do yer Legilimency on me," said Hagrid almost plaintively.

"I can, Hagrid, it's just an effort. Besides, Harry and I will do this together. He sounds like he's ready for something new. Your mind will be the laboratory for our experiments," she added in a tone reminiscent of an old Muggle monster movie, most likely from a character named Igor.

Hagrid looked back and forth at the two of them several times. "Well, I suppose whatever happened, there's little sense in keepin' it hidden anymore. 'Specially if it might'a been the other side that hid it. All right," he said in grim resolution. "What'll I need to do, then?"

"Just sit there and look beautiful," Ondossi said with a wink, but then her smile disappeared. She put her elbow on the table and leaned on it a moment, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"Here's the deal," she said abruptly. "Memories can't be erased. Each one represents a change in the brain itself, in the structure of its cells. The only way to erase them is with tissue damage. But even that's not easy. Memories aren't just stuffed into one cell like sardines in a tin. They're made of connections, how one cell reacts with another with the touch of a particular dendrite. Thousands, maybe millions of cells each hold part of any given memory. Really important things like your name have an anchor in every single cell; the only way to erase them is to kill the entire brain.

"But memories can be ignored. That's also built in. Think of how many things happen to you in a day--every touch, every sound, everything you see, smell... You don't even notice most of them. You don't remember every footstep, but you know you've gone for a walk, that sort of thing. That's one way to hide a memory--to reclassify it as 'just one of those things,' too unimportant to bring to the surface." She turned to Hagrid. "Are you ready for this?"

Hagrid squared his shoulders. "Aw, it can't be all that bad," he said gamely.

"All right, well, open him up, Harry, and we'll see what we can find."

Harry nodded and motioned to Hagrid to come closer. He grinned encouragingly at Hagrid and set his hand gently on his friend's forehead.

Harry was able to head straight to the memory of interest without even having to get his bearings. He ran through it, wondering if Tura was keeping up with him. Harry became dimly aware of Tura knitting her fingers with his own on Hagrid's brow, but he had no sense of her presence in Hagrid's mind until her words formed.

"Show me the gaps." Harry called the memory forth slowly, spotting even more inconsistencies than the first time--for one thing, the baby (himself!) was wrapped in one blanket when he was pulled from the wreckage, and a completely different blanket when he was presented to Dumbledore. Unless Sirius had routinely kept a fleecy blanket with teddy bears on his chopper, there was no explanation for this change.

As Harry watched, the memory slowed of its own apparent accord, though he suspected Tura must be doing it. Hagrid glanced away from the baby wrapped in a yellow blanket, then it was blue with teddy bears the next time he looked.

The blanket seemed to grow, filling the entirety of Harry's vision as though it had been placed over his head, and yet not so, because it seemed to grow dimmer or thinner. It felt almost as though he was using Occlumency to push back out of Hagrid's consciousness, yet it seemed he was getting closer to the memory, if anything. Harry could feel Hagrid's forehead, Tura's fingers--he was slipping out of Legilimency, and yet the blanket was all he could see. He broke out in a cold sweat after a sudden rush of vertigo; the discrepancy between the vision of his mind's eye and the feelings from his nerves disoriented him. For a moment, Harry's knees became so wobbly he nearly had to break the link to steady himself.

Suddenly the blanket shrank away and Harry was gazing down at Sirius Black from Hagrid's height. He didn't know if they were in Godric's Hollow anymore, but they were certainly not at the site of his parents' home. Sirius had been crying and looked quite worn, but Harry could see the determination in his bearing. This was the man who would track down and confront Peter Pettigrew and be blamed for the Potters' murder, all within the next twenty-four hours. Harry had to fight the urge to call to him from the future, to warn Sirius of the extent of Wormtail's treachery, to save him from his inevitable fate.

"I don't want to give him up, Hagrid," said Sirius. "But you're right. There's something I need to take care of, and little Harry can't go with me." *Don't do it, Sirius. It won't bring them back.* Sirius looked up at Hagrid. "Did you say you came here on a thestral?"

*A thestral? What thestral? Where are they?* Harry thought. Tura seemed to recognize that this was only a fraction of the missing piece, as Sirius's face abruptly disappeared, replaced by the destruction in Godric's Hollow. Hagrid was speaking. "Maybe he oughter come with me, to Hogwarts. Dumbledore might--"

"I'll take him!" said Sirius, glaring at Hagrid with such strength and defiance that the giant flinched. Harry thought that Sirius looked almost as powerful as Dumbledore at that moment; a fearsome wizard, no longer the boy Harry had seen in the Pensieve toying with Snape, not yet the emaciated shadow that would emerge years later from the horrors of Azkaban. "I'm his godfather. I'm all he has left. He's all I--" Sirius's throat constricted, apparently from grief, and he began stuffing the baby into his leather jacket.

Harry heard Tura again. "It's there now. Study if you wish. I'm leaving." Harry needed no further prompting.

Harry patted Hermione when he remembered how to raise his arm, to thank her for staying with him all afternoon in the cabin. He had no idea when Ondossi had left, and vaguely recalled Hagrid announcing he needed a long walk and departing some time earlier. He wasn't ready to speak for another hour, and by the time the numbness completely wore off, it was nearly dinner time.

Harry held off describing what he'd seen until he, Ron, and Hermione were gathered comfortably around the hearth in the common room. "It's almost worse, knowing Hagrid's full memory," he concluded miserably. "I mean, what did we learn? We already knew that Sirius carried me off on the motorcycle, Everett told us that!"

Hermione peered at him reproachfully. "Now, Harry, you can't get all unwound because Hagrid didn't have all the answers on a silver platter. You may not have learned everything, but you learned a lot. You learned that Sirius took you to Wales. You spent nearly twenty-four hours with him there. Now that you have a place to look, maybe someday you can snoop around a bit, like we did in the Hollow. Sirius must have picked Gwynedd for a reason; maybe there's still someone there that knows it."

Harry didn't find her comments particularly comforting. "Yeah, another mystery," he grumbled. "I may or may not live long enough to solve it. We were just unspeakably lucky that it happened to be Everett walking by that night in the Hollow, you know. If it were anyone else in town, we never would have known about the Ministry car, or Sirius keeping me. You think we're going to have that same kind of luck in Gwynedd?"

"That's not true at all, Harry! We would have tried harder at the Green Dragon until Uther talked to us," said Hermione. "Or maybe we would have needed more time to learn what we wanted. I expected all along that we'd have to comb through Muggle records to find your parents' old address, and then chat with the neighbors on all sides until we found one that knew what happened. Which would have put us at the Gamigides' doorstep anyway, it just would have taken a bit more work and time."

Harry stared at the tabletop, sulking, until Hermione sniffed in annoyance. "Honestly, Harry. You get discouraged too easily. You know, Lupin may already know the

connection Sirius had to Gwynedd. Maybe he had a relative there--perhaps that uncle that took him in when his parents disowned him? And if Lupin doesn't know, maybe we can find the answer in some of Sirius's papers--Lupin kept everything Sirius owned up in the attic. It will just take a little legwork... Harry?"

Hermione abruptly stopped speaking. Ron, who had been ignoring her in favor of watching the fire, noticed the unexpected quiet and looked up. Harry was gripping the edge of the table with both hands turning white from the tension, and staring fixedly off into space. "What is it?" asked Ron, his brows drawn in concern.

"The attic. Of course. Hermione, you're brilliant!" Harry looked up at them with rekindled excitement.

"Oh, great, encourage her," grumbled Ron. Hermione cast a dagger at him with her eyes, but then they regarded one another and shrugged; neither had any idea what Harry was going on about.

"Lupin put everything in the *attic*," said Harry. "He even told me so himself, gah, how could I have forgotten? Come on, we're going there right now." Harry leapt to his feet and headed for the fireplace, but stopped and whirled back around to face them. "Drat! I forgot, school's in session, the Floo won't work. We'll have to Apparate."

Ron and Hermione didn't budge. "Harry, what are you thinking?" said Ron. "It's after dark, and you not only want to leave the castle, but the grounds? Unless your Cloak has suddenly grown, how are we supposed to get past Filch?"

"Oh, who cares for Filch?" Harry said crossly. "This is much more important than some stupid curfew."

"What is, Harry?" said Hermione. "You haven't even told us what you want to do!"

Harry sighed impatiently, but sat back down at last. "The mirror. Sirius's mirror... the mate of the one we fixed. Lupin put it away, he said so. It must be in the attic with everything else." Ron and Hermione continued to stare at him so vacuously he wondered if he had accidentally spoken in Parseltongue. "Don't you see? We might not have to snoop around to find out what Sirius did that night. Maybe we can get it straight from him!"

Both Ron and Hermione rolled their eyes at this proposal; Harry expected as much from Hermione, but he was ready to kick Ron in the shins. To his further dismay, it was Ron who spoke up first to dissuade him.

"Harry, you know I'm always right there with you, but mate, you need to think this through. Assuming we can get off the grounds without getting caught, *and* manage to find this thing in Headquarters, *AND* get into the Ministry (which is the second-most guarded place in the UK after Hogwarts, since the attacks), it's a very, very, *very* long stretch that Sirius will... that this plan will work. That's a lot of risk and effort, Harry, for something that stands a good chance of going nowhere."

Harry smacked the tabletop with his fist and jumped up, but even as he pushed his chair back, he realized he had nowhere to go. Ron was right. The odds of it working were astronomically low, while the obstacles to get there were both large and numerous. He exhaled, closing his eyes and trying to think calmly.

"All right," he finally said, returning to his seat for the third time in five minutes. "It can wait until tomorrow. We get permission from Hagrid to leave the grounds first thing in the morning, then head to London--"

"Where we can spend a whole Sunday in a dusty old attic, just after spending Saturday in Hagrid's cabin," said Hermione crossly. "I have a better idea. Why don't we wait until the next time Lupin checks in, and then *ask* where the mirror is. Perhaps he can even bring it here. Then at least we can face the Ministry with a fresh start--although Merlin forbid we make up a *plan* for getting in the building... Hello? Harry?" He was staring off into space with a look of inspired concentration once again, but when she called his name, he turned to her with an even wider smile than the first time.

"We don't need to get it ourselves, *or* ask Lupin. Kreacher can do it!" Hermione glowered at him, but Harry ignored it. "Come on, you know he's got a tally of every little thing in that house now, after that business with Mundungus Fletcher. Think of it as: now we don't have to bother poor Remus. Kreacher," Harry called out to thin air. "Come here! Can you hear me? Kreacher!"

There was no appearance, no reply, no acknowledgement of any kind. Harry frowned, glancing between Ron and Hermione. Ron shrugged, but Hermione wouldn't even look at him. "Well that's odd, isn't it," said Harry, quite stunned that the house-elf did not show up immediately. "Think we ought to nip off to the kitchen, then?" he asked Ron.

Ron nodded gamely, then patted his belly. "Could pick up a little cake or something for later, too. What about you, Hermione?"

Neither expected her to come along, or even answer them for that matter, given her opinion on the rights of house-elves. However, she crossed her arms and leveled them both with an angry glare. "You're wasting your time, you know. Even if you can find him, he won't obey you. He doesn't have to anymore. You're not the Master of The Most Noble House of Black anymore, Harry. Remember? You gave it to Lupin--and Kreacher went with it." Hermione grimaced in distaste at the whole notion, then sat back into her armchair with an angry huff and resumed ignoring them.

"Oops," said Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry. "I forgot about all that." He slumped in his chair.

Ron looked up with a sly grin. "Imagine--Lupin owns a house elf, and the Malfoys don't. What's the world coming to, eh?"

Now Ron received the delighted grin that had twice been given to Hermione. He caught on immediately; Harry and Ron said "Dobby!" at the same time.

There was a loud crack, and Dobby appeared promptly, wearing, to their surprise, a sweater that was obviously knitted by Ron's mother. "Harry Potter! Dobby is so happy you called! It has been ages since Dobby has visited his best friend, Harry Potter!"

The sudden appearance of a house-elf in the middle of the common room produced an immediate hush among all present, and Dobby's exuberant greeting carried to every corner. Harry shrank in his chair and motioned to Dobby to keep his voice down. Dobby understood and leaned in conspiratorially, with the result that all they could see of him were his big bulbous eyes peering over the tabletop. A muffled "What can Dobby do for Harry Potter?" issued up from around their knees.

"Hi, Dobby," said Harry quietly. "We were wondering if you could lend a hand with something." Dobby's eyes somehow managed to grow even wider, and Harry quickly brought a finger to his lips, in anticipation of another loud, enthusiastic outburst from the elf. The eyeballs began bobbing up and down gleefully, but made no sound.

"I'm not sure what exactly you can do," said Harry, thinking hard. "Here's the rub: We need to find something that belonged to Sirius. I know it's somewhere at Headquarters, probably the attic. Kreacher would undoubtedly know, but I don't... I don't think he'll cooperate with me. I was wondering--" Harry paused. Dobby was already shaking his head, something Harry had never seen him do before. Hermione had taken an immediate interest in this apparent refusal, but Harry could tell by the dejected look in Dobby's eyes that there was more to it than a simple "no." "What is it, Dobby?" he asked gravely.

Dobby was so upset his ears drooped, making him look like a drowned rabbit more than anything else. "Oh, Harry Potter," he said mournfully, "Dobby would gladly do anything for his friend, but no one can speak to Kreacher any more. Kreacher is dead."

"Dead?" gulped Harry. "What happened?"

Dobby shrugged, his shoulders poking briefly up over the tabletop. "Kreacher was very old. One night after his supper, Kreacher went to his nest off the kitchens, and did not wake up again. That is the usual way with my kind, Harry Potter."

Harry felt rather disconcerted, although he was not saddened by the news. Kreacher had schemed with the Malfoys, betrayed the Order, and set into motion the events that

led to Sirius's death, and Harry had never forgiven him for that. Nonetheless, Dumbledore had impressed upon him a sense of responsibility for Kreacher, and it was giving him a nagging sense of guilt. Harry hadn't even realized he'd passed Kreacher on to Lupin, much less that the elf was dead, and he felt as though he'd failed somehow as a caretaker.

"When did this happen?" Harry asked Dobby somberly.

Dobby's eyes tipped upward as he concentrated. "Let Dobby think a moment... It was June, the third week... June 19?" He peeked around anxiously, as though worried he had offended Harry by hesitating.

Harry's stomach turned to lead for a moment. He recalled his brief intention to summon Kreacher to cook dinner for him back on Privet Drive; the elf had been dead for a month at that point. *Well, it's not like he would have known--or cared--if I died,* thought Harry stubbornly, but it didn't make him feel any better.

"Well, I guess that shoots down that plan," said Ron. "Any other ideas?"

Hermione thwapped Ron's knuckles with her wand, apparently too fed up to bother berating him anymore. Dobby, however, perked up at Ron's remark; of all of them, he seemed the least upset by the notion of Kreacher's death. "Dobby would still like to help Harry Potter. Perhaps Dobby could find the thing you want. Dobby knows some of Kreacher's hiding places, you know," the elf said confidentially. "Dobby never trusted him. He was always squirreling things away, Dark things from that Dark house."

Harry sighed. "This wasn't a Dark thing, Dobby. This was just a mirror. It was magical, but it belonged to Sirius. Lupin most likely packed it away."

Dobby stood up so straight and proud that his chin crested over the table. "Dobby would be delighted to check the attic for this mirror. Dobby would check a hundred attics; nothing is too much for Harry Potter to ask."

Harry waved at Dobby before he went off on another extended praising; those embarrassed him under the best of circumstances, and he felt particularly undeserving right then. "I'd be grateful, Dobby, if you could have a look around for it," Harry said sincerely. Dobby looked ecstatic, but Harry again put a finger to his lips to hush the elf. Dobby ducked down again below the table and settled for casting Harry an adoring gaze, then disappeared with another loud crack.

Hermione peered kindly at Harry, which surprised him. He had expected her to be outraged about this latest exploitation of house-elves. "I'm sorry about Kreacher, Harry," she said gently. Ron made a face, but fortunately her attention was on Harry and thus Ron's other hand went unsmacked.

Hermione soon set to work on some Arithmancy problems and Ron attempted to build a house of cards without using any magic, but Harry was so sure that Dobby would return any moment that he couldn't concentrate on any sort of project. After fifteen minutes passed with no sign of Dobby, however, Harry began to fidget and tap his fingers. After an hour, Ron and Hermione were fidgeting as well; Harry was driving them crazy. "Will you stop pacing, already?" grumbled Ron. "I'm about ready to take your Cloak and get down to Headquarters myself, just to get this bloody well over with!"

"Why is he taking so long?" Harry fretted for the millionth time.

Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book shut and shot Harry a glare that could fry an egg. "I don't know, but stomping in circles around the hearth isn't going to speed up the process! Here's a thought, Harry: Do some homework. You didn't get any done last night, or today, and if Dobby turns up with the mirror, you won't get any done tomorrow either. It's our last year here, after this we're on our own. Don't you think you ought to be taking advantage of it while you can?"

Harry opened his mouth for a snappy comeback, but the words stuck in his throat as he recalled his earlier conversation with Ondossi. *People have died because I've been out playing Quidditch and dancing at weddings.* Hermione was right (again, blast it); if he was going to stay at Hogwarts, he ought to soak up every bit of knowledge he could hold.

The common room quieted as students filed off to their dormitories or the library. Ron completed his house of cards and grudgingly opened his Charms textbook as well, when it became obvious that Harry was as determined to finish his homework as Hermione. By the time Dobby returned to the common room, it was nearly midnight, and Harry was caught up on more homework than he'd ever been on a Saturday night. One look at Dobby's dejected face, however, and he knew he'd have plenty of time to keep working on it tomorrow.

"Did you have trouble, Dobby?" Harry asked gently, knowing that the elf had undoubtedly berated himself far more harshly than Harry would ever dream of. There were tears welling up in his enormous eyes.

"Dobby is so ashamed, Harry Potter. The mirror could not be found."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed with disappointment, but he didn't blame Dobby. He knew the elf would leave no stone unturned; if Dobby couldn't find it in the attic, then it wasn't in the attic. He would just have to wait until Remus checked in. "It's alright, Dobby. Remus must have put it away somewhere else."

Dobby looked even more miserable. "There is more to tell, Harry Potter. Dobby spoke with Master Lupin. The attic at Headquarters, you see... Dobby did not think Master Lupin left it that way. It looked fine at first glance, Harry Potter, but beyond the first row of nice neat shelves, many things were strewn about, pulled from their boxes. Dobby went to find the Master of the House right away, and brought him to the attic." The elf pulled his ears down beside his head and began twisting them, an old reflex from his service with the Malfoys. Hermione clicked her tongue and gently tugged the ears from Dobby's hands, then pulled a rubber band from her hair and gave it to him. Dobby beamed at her in gratitude and began snapping it around his fingers instead.

"Well, what did Lupin say?" asked Ron.

"Master Lupin was most upset," said Dobby meekly. "He had worked very hard to put things away neatly. Master Lupin became quite angry that someone had gone through the boxes, especially since they had tried to conceal what they had done. He spoke with Dobby for a long time." Dobby paused, puffing up his chest with pride. "He even asked Dobby for his opinion about the culprit! Harry Potter has such lovely friends, they treat Dobby with the same respect as Harry Potter! Dobby is so lucky to have met Harry Potter; Dobby would be curled up miserable in the basement of Malfoy Manor right now if it weren't for Harry Potter."

"It wasn't all up to me, Dobby," said Harry firmly, hoping to stem the oncoming tide of compliments. "You had to find the courage to defy your master and come to me, you know. I couldn't have done it without you."

Dobby's mouth fell open and the rubber band twanged as it flew, forgotten, across the common room. *Oops. So much for that idea,* thought Harry. He had to endure a long geyser of raw, bubbling praise from Dobby before the little elf could return to his story.

"Dobby of course suspected Kreacher was the thief. There were many valuable things left behind, and besides, who else would be so cunning about disguising his mischief? That horrible Mundungus Fletcher would not. He would take anything he could sell from every box, not leave two whole shelves untouched. Master Lupin agreed with Dobby on that score." Dobby blushed, his thin ears suddenly glowing red in the firelight.

"Dobby helped Master Lupin put things back in their boxes, but there was no mirror. Master Lupin found the box he'd packed it in, and it had been opened." Dobby's high spirits evaporated once again, and he regarded Harry mournfully. "Kreacher must have taken it, Harry Potter. He always favored shiny things. But Dobby looked through every hiding place he knew and did not find any mirrors." He looked so crestfallen that Harry feared he'd go after the ears once more.

"Thanks, Dobby," said Harry. "I know you tried." Though Harry was careful to mask it in front of the house-elf, he felt completely crushed. He'd come to think of the mirror as a linchpin in this final, desperate crusade against that mystical veil under the Ministry. Without it, without the capacity to prove with his own two eyes whether Sirius was held somehow within that cursed thing, Harry knew he would be haunted, tormented, *enslaved* by the question of whether his godfather still lived.

# 17: The Killing Curse

Chapter 17 of 50

Harry and Ron have a Guy Moment on the Quidditch Pitch, prompting a particularly harsh lesson from the DADA professor. A big surprise at the end of the day.



For weeks after Dobby's report, disappointment draped over Harry like the morning mist on the Hogwarts grounds. Ron and Hermione exchanged many pointed looks over Harry's sudden intense focus on his studies, as well as his irritable brooding when he finished his homework. Hermione considered the studious aspect an improvement, but neither of them knew how to help Harry snap out of this funk.

The Quidditch tryouts on the second weekend seemed to help a bit, at least at the time. Elias Ravenclaw downplayed his flying skills considerably, while tossing an occasional roguish grin to Harry or Ron. He'd spent his life deliberately hiding his finest magic, and he seemed perfectly content to be the Gryffindor team's best kept secret. There were a number of angry glares when Harry picked Elias for Beater (many of which were from the Ravenclaw team, who considered Elias a turncoat from that day on), but on the whole, the tryouts were largely absent of the hostility that had been seen the year before.

Ron, Ginny, and Demelza remained in their previous positions of Keeper and Chasers. It was a tough choice between last year's Beaters, Ritchie Cootes and Jimmy Peakes, for the final slot on the team, but Harry finally went with Cootes. Cootes had clearly practiced over the summer and his aim was now dead-on 99% of the time. Peakes was disappointed, but he took the decision fairly well and he was accepted later that day by the Ravenclaw team. Harry had a feeling there would be some rather fierce rivalry between the two teams' Beaters; it would surely be an interesting season, if they didn't Bludger one another to death.

As the team captain, Harry dutifully scheduled practices on Saturday mornings, but his heart wasn't really in it. He couldn't shake off the guilty notion that he was wasting precious time and precious lives by doing anything other than battling with Voldemort.

One balmy evening, Harry and Ron were zipping about the Quidditch pitch on their brooms as the lapwings snapped up insects in the field below and pink-footed geese yip-yipped their goodnights to one another on the lake. Ron had asked Harry to come and knock the Quaffle about so he could practice tending goal, but he soon brought up what was really on his mind.

"Harry, what's got into you?" Ron blurted after a particularly easy save. "You've barely cracked a smile in two weeks. You're studying so much it's starting to scare me! And now you're not focusing on your game? This is getting serious, mate." Ron held onto the Quaffle instead of throwing it back, so Harry couldn't hide behind the pretense of practicing.

Harry sat back on his broom with a look of sorrowful resignation. "I don't know, Ron," was all he said.

"All right," said Ron with a frown. "Let's look at each thing separately. Starting with your game." He flung the Quaffle back to Harry and, having drifted off to the left, nudged his broom back to the center hoop. "Look at you. Going soft, Harry. You think you're such a blooming Quidditch genius that you don't need to train anymore?"

Harry mustered a lopsided grin and tried to bounce the Quaffle off Ron's head. "It's not that. I just... I don't know that I'll be playing anymore. I'm thinking of putting Dean Thomas back on and making Ginny the Seeker."

"Ah, well, that explains everything," Ron said sarcastically. "You've gone mental!"

"Look, my last few games weren't all that great, Ron. In fact, you seem to have done better without me."

Ron rolled his eyes and hurled the Quaffle at Harry so hard that he slid backwards on the broomstick from the impact. "Oh, please! We didn't do too well that time McClaggen cracked your skull, or so I was told," he scoffed. "And that final match with Ravenclaw--well, we had to win that, didn't we? Couldn't let that prat hold you prisoner in the dungeon without showing him a thing or two about Gryffindor!" Harry had spent the last game of the previous season serving detention with Snape.

Harry grinned again, but his eyes were downcast. "Or maybe you just didn't need me. Not like others need me."

Ron nodded thoughtfully, his broomstick gently bobbing in time with his head. "So that's it, then. Merlin's beard! Hermione's right *again*, blast it all. I thought you were moping about on account of missing Sirius again, but she said it was guilt about the Prophecy," he added in explanation. "Gah! Do me a favor and don't tell her she nailed it, eh, Harry?"

Ron could always cheer him up, even if only temporarily. "Never," Harry assured him. Ron gave an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"Well, just between us then," said Ron, "what are we going to do about it? I won't have you doing homework and sulking for the rest of the year, Harry. It's beginning to feel like a detention just going to the common room anymore!" Ron shook an accusing finger at him. "Here's what I think, mate: Maybe we need a change of scenery." He gleamed sidelong at Harry, who blinked in surprise.

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" said Harry, and Ron smiled grimly. "You think we should just go? Pull a Fred-and-George?" The twins' theatric departure from Hogwarts during the reign of Dolores Umbridge had become a part of Hogwarts's local vocabulary.

Ron nodded again. "Why not? You know it's got to come sooner or later, and you don't seem to be weathering the wait very well. Maybe it's time, Harry."

"But the Horcruxes... We can't really put a stop to him without finding them first."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe not, but dying sure slowed him down the first time, didn't it? And if he wants to come back again, he'll need 'the blood of the enemy' for his little potion, just like last time. So we'll just keep killing him over and over until he uses up all those bits of soul he's got stashed around."

Harry stared at his friend. "You're a genius, Ron," he finally whispered reverently.

"So we'll do it, then?" said Ron, his voice grave, his jaw set.

Harry flattened his lips and gripped the broomstick very tightly, just once. "All right. I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

The sound of a single pair of hands clapping to a slow tempo echoed around the pitch. "Bravo! Encore! Encore!" It was Ondossi. Ron scanned around in confusion, but Harry knew precisely where to find her. He motioned to Ron to follow, and the two of them flew around the back of the bleachers and up to her platform. She remained in the shadows from which she'd observed the whole exchange, and kept clapping until Harry stepped off his broomstick. Then she just folded her arms and glared at both of them.

"You have something to say, Professor?" said Harry indignantly.

She motioned to Ron to land as well and sat down at the edge of the shadows. "You know," she began in a sour tone, "I was warned about this. 'Stubborn is his middle name,' he told me. 'If you ever need him to do something, tell him to do the opposite.' And here it is. What was it, two weeks ago, that I said it would be a terrible mistake to rush while your true magic is finally coming in? I suppose I'm lucky you made it this long before leaping into some idiotic plan."

Harry clenched his teeth angrily, but Ron spoke up. "Who's to say it's idiotic? No more idiotic than doing nothing while V-Voldemort has free reign out there."

Ondossi turned her full attention to Ron. "Let me ask you something, Mr. Weasley. Do you recall how your mother reacted when her twin sons left Hogwarts to start a *joke shop* on Diagon Alley--a venture which has turned out to be a staggering success? Do you?" Ron dropped his gaze to the platform, but Ondossi didn't back off in the slightest. "Mm-hmm. And how do you suppose she'd take it if her baby boy walked out to get *slaughtered* in some forsaken swamp or desert or whatever? Maybe to return as an Inferi, even? Wouldn't that make her day?"

Ron looked up with a vicious glare, but he was hopelessly outgunned. Ondossi went silent and Harry knew she was in Ron's mind, describing in exquisite detail the kind of death Voldemort had planned for him. Ron's eyes were blank, but as soon as Ondossi turned away from him, they were filled with shock and loathing. Ron gasped for his next breath, but did not speak.

"And you!" said Ondossi, baring her teeth at Harry like an angry wolf. "What did he say earlier? 'You think you're such a Quidditch genius you don't need to train?' HAH!" She tossed her head, her long hair flicking into a rather impressive arc behind her. "He said it, hotshot--and now you don't need to train anymore to face Lord Voldemort either. What *talents* you have! Must be nice to have everything come so easy."

"Are you finished, then?" Harry said sullenly.

She smiled with arrogant triumph. "Oh, no, that was just the first piece, hotshot. It's time you got the whole thing. Let's you and me do a little flying. We're gonna need more room." She stepped out to the edge of the platform, squinting hard in the rays of the setting sun.

Harry picked up his Firebolt. "No hysterics this time?" he growled, mounting the broomstick at the edge of the platform without trying to assist her.

"All business on my end, bucko," she said contemptuously. "Let's roll." She hopped over the back of the broom and took hold of his waist, but despite the tough talk, Harry could feel her shivering behind him. He had thought to push off the platform at full tilt and give *her* a little taste of fear, but he realized that would be a bit overkill if simply sitting on the broom was enough to make her tremble.

Harry glanced at Ron once more, but Ron, still a bit pale, gave him a reassuring wave. "Where are we heading?" he asked Ondossi gruffly.

"Forest. Find a quiet clearing," she said, straining to keep her voice even. He gave up on any lingering thoughts about putting the Firebolt through its paces. Ondossi annoyed him, but not enough for frank cruelty--and besides, if she lost it over the Forbidden Forest, there was no telling where they might land. Harry pushed off gently and flew in the general direction of Grawp's former "home." Hagrid had chained him up deep in the forest proper, but during Grawp's "taming" period, the spot became a clearing pretty quickly.

Harry landed a bit roughly; there was a slight difference in the Firebolt's handling near the ground with a passenger. He was a little embarrassed, but as he turned to face Ondossi, he doubted she had noticed the *faux pas*. She was crouched down, clutching and releasing the soil of the forest floor with both hands, and even in the long shadows he could see the cold sweat on her forehead. *She really hates flying*, he mused, unable to fathom such a sentiment.

Ondossi cleared her throat and stood up. "Thank you," she said. "For not trying to scare the bejeepers out of me, that is. You'da needed a serious broom cleaner if you'd tried," she added quietly.

Harry chuckled. "I reckoned as much." He paused as his sympathy drained away and defiance returned. "All right," he said crossly, "you have something to show me? Going to humble me, then? Prove how much more you know than I do?"

"Far be it from me to prove anything to *you*, hotshot," she snapped. "It's your turn. Show me your stuff, Killer! Impress me."

Harry deliberately let his shoulders slump in a gesture of hopeless disgust. "You want me to duel with you? Is that it?" He reached into his robes for his wand.

"Duel?" she scoffed. "Oh, no. No parlor games. I want to see you kill."

It was Harry's turn to scoff. "Bloody dramatics. You dragged me out here for this?"

"Come on, hotshot, I said show me! You were ready to march out that gate and kill Lord Voldemort. I want to see you kill right now, just in case I miss that show later."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Okay. Sure. Watch." He cracked his knuckles and made a show of readying himself, shaking out his shoulders and doing some deep knee bends. She scowled harder and harder during the process, which suited him just fine. He finally stood up straight, his face the very essence of concentration, raised his wand--and dropped to the ground, ripped up a tiny sapling tree, and sprang back to his feet. Harry snapped the miniature trunk in two and threw the pieces at her. "Happy now?"



"Cute," Ondossi said in a grudging voice, though screwing up her face to keep from smiling. "Let's try something that can fight back." She stepped back, spreading her arms wide as if to make herself the biggest possible target. She bowed, regarding him with smug expectation.

Harry just stood and stared at her, but she didn't show any signs of dropping this absurd stance. He finally hissed angrily, "Enough, already! You don't even have a wand!"

"Correct," she said evenly. "Even so, I'm hardly quaking in my boots. Any guess as to why that is?"

"I don't have to guess, Tura. It's because I can't take a shot at you and you know it. You're trying to prove some point about how hard it is to kill another person but it's just stupid."

"Wrong!" she announced, rolling her eyes. "I *do* have a point to make, but not that one. I'm not worried about the curse, Harry, because *I know you can't do it, period.* You can't use it, you can't make it work."

"And what makes you so bloody certain?"

She dropped her arms to her sides and laughed. "Because you're not Dark enough, sweet thing. Remember when you tried the Cruciatus on Bellatrix LeStrange? I heard all about that. She barely winced, didn't she, and you hated her up one side and down the other. Try and hit me with the Cruciatus, hotshot. Don't worry about the law, I'll forgive you for it," she taunted.

"My pleasure," said Harry, his voice dry and sharp, slicing the air like a sword. He pointed his wand. "*Crucio.*"

As soon as the word left his tongue, Harry was appalled that he'd let her goad him into such an abhorrent act. But to his relief *and* dismay, she took a single step backwards and coughed, then squared herself up, hands on her hips. "Not as lame as I expected," she conceded, "but I've had white-sock bites that hurt worse."

"Don't you ever do that to me again," Harry said through his teeth.

"No need," she replied with disdain. "I've seen for myself now: you can't do it. Just like the Kedavra."

Harry shook his head. "No. I can do it. I may not be able to inflict pain, but I can kill. I know it."

"I can't torture, but I can kill," Ondossi parroted in a mocking tone. She scanned around the treetops for a moment, then pointed up into a willow tree. "Here's an idea. You're afraid to aim it at me? Then kill that finch up there."

Harry saw it; the finch was preening on a branch about halfway up the tree. He gave Ondossi a furious glare and pointed his wand.

The words wouldn't come. Harry watched the little animal as it straightened its feathers, oblivious to any danger. No, not oblivious; its shiny eyes were constantly peering around, alert for hawks or other enemies. Harry didn't know if the bird really understood the concept of mortality, but whether it did or not, it took measures to protect itself and preserve its life. Furthermore, it had never done Harry any harm. The idea of killing an innocent creature made the curse stick in his throat.

"C'mon, Killer!" Ondossi sneered. "Do it! What's the matter?"

Harry lowered his wand. "This is stupid. I'm not going to kill some helpless bird just so you can prove some sadistic little point."

Ondossi yanked hard on the front of Harry's robe, pulling him down to meet her gaze. He started to twist away from her, but she held even tighter to the fabric, using her weight to pull him down lower, closer, until his face was pressed against her throat and her lips brushed his forehead. He watched, transfixed, as her neck flattened and spread out, the skin rippling into a semblance of pebbly scales. Twin needles briefly pricked him on either side of his scar.

"Know this, Potter," she breathed in an icy, distorted whisper, "if I ever have a 'sadistic point' to make, it will be very, very clear."

She released him as her throat snapped back to its normal contour, her skin smoothing instantly, though he straightened up quickly enough to see the tips of fangs retract over her lip and disappear.

"What in the name of Merlin was that?" Harry said, holding his ground although his skin was crawling.

Ondossi put her hand over her mouth, wide-eyed with mortification. "I didn't mean for you to see that," she mumbled. "You really frost my apples sometimes, Harry."

"Apparently so," said Harry, though he was not at all relieved by her apparent chagrin. "Answer the question."

She hung her head. "That's one of my little secrets. I'm an Animagus. I learned to do it back in the steam tunnels. It's a lot easier to enjoy a rat kabob as an animal than as a girl."

Harry slowly began to nod. "Let me guess. A snake," he said.

"Cobra, actually," she said, glancing up furtively as though she were ashamed. "I wanted to be a wolf but that was what worked."

Harry leaned back against the broken stump of what was once a huge pine tree. "You are one creepy sorcerer," he said in complete sincerity.

She replied, equally somberly, "I know that."

Harry finally averted his own eyes. "Alright, alright, I was out of line with the sadistic point remark. But so are you. I don't want to kill that bird for no reason; that would just be evil."

"It's not 'for no reason,' Harry," Ondossi said briskly, regaining her composure now that they were off the subject of snakes. "There's a *very good* reason. This is the most challenging spell you'll ever cast--and you don't plan to practice it beforehand? Think about what you're saying! You despised that Umbridge woman for denying you the right to practice spells. Now you're saying you don't need practice?"

She stepped back, glancing around on the ground. "Look, you don't want to kill the bird, that's all right. Start with a bug. You've killed bugs before, even without magic. Here's some ants right down here. Kill a few of them. They don't mind, they're a hive; one ant is nothing."

Harry looked carefully at the line of ants. She was right; unlike the finch, Harry had no sense whatsoever that the ants feared death, or even knew that they were alive to begin with. He rolled his eyes at her and said, "All right. I'll do it." He pointed his wand. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Nothing happened.

Harry's jaw dropped. He leaned closer, certain that at least one of the ants must have keeled over; perhaps the amount of magic required to wipe out one ant was so minuscule that they hadn't been able to see the light from the wand. But the line of ants was trudging along unbroken as before; there were no little ant corpses to be found.

"Try to concentrate, Harry," she said dully.

Harry crouched down to get a closer look at his targets. Maybe he had to focus on one ant to make it work. They were zipping along purposefully; perhaps his curse had simply missed all of them. "Damn it, they walk so fast!" he muttered. He finally flicked a few ants out of the line, where they at least stopped marching and began to mill

about, tapping one another with their antennae to reorient themselves. He pointed his wand again. "*Avada Kedavra*."

The ants continued their frenetic tapping.

"I don't believe it," he said. "Did I say it wrong? Tura, what's happening?"

"What's happening," said Ondossi, "is that you're getting the *point*. Do you see it's not just aiming the wand and saying the words? It's much more than that, Harry. You don't just belt it out like some penny-ante jinx and let your wand do the work. Killing is an act of your will, *yours*, not the wand. You have to summon your magic, all of it, good, bad, and indifferent, all the power you have in you, and propel that curse through your victim."

Harry had been so sure he could do it. He meant to leave with Ron tonight to put an end to it all. Hermione probably would tag along despite their efforts to sneak off without her, and Harry would secretly be glad to have her there. They would track down Voldemort, trusting Harry to pull off the "impossible" one more time, and he would fail them. He couldn't even kill an ant. Harry thought he might be sick.

"Do you understand now, Harry?" said Ondossi. "You have to *become a killer*. It's not enough to feel righteous, or vengeful, or angry. You have to perform a spell, a very, very complex spell that you have to practice, and that practice is going to hurt you and change you and make a dark, ugly place inside you. And that's all peanuts compared to what'll happen when you finally kill another human being! You won't even be yourself anymore, Harry, part of you will be ripped out forever."

Ondossi looked momentarily as though she were on the verge of tears, but she shook her head and settled into a cold stance. She took out her thin white wand and pointed it at the ants, still circling where Harry had flipped them. Beckoning Harry closer, she whispered, "*Avada Kedavra*." A narrow beam of green light shot from her wand, and all of the ants shriveled and fell. She pointed at the long row of ants on the march. "*Avada Kedavra*." Another green ray and every ant in a six-inch section of the line froze on the spot, dead.

Ondossi looked at Harry with her fathomless eyes and held out her left hand. Harry wasn't sure what she wanted--his wand? She beckoned again and he understood; setting his jaw, he put his hand in hers. She tugged and guided him gently until he stood alongside her, draping his right arm and hand over her own. She looked up at him once more, then concentrated on the finch, pointing her wand. "Say it, Harry."

He looked up at the little bird and felt chilled to the core, but he spoke. "*Avada Kedavra*." A ripple like an electric current ran the entire length of his arm. The finch fell to the ground instantly, landing on its back with its claws curled.

For a moment, Harry felt nothing. He just stood there and looked at the creature they had killed, expecting it to wake up and fly away at any moment. The whole thing seemed unreal, a mirage or hallucination. It couldn't possibly be so painless, so *simple*, to snuff out a life. But the finch was most certainly dead, and all Harry had done was say two words; the magic had come from Tura. Mostly. Hadn't it?

Harry suddenly dropped to his knees, breaking out in a cold sweat from head to toe and reeling with nausea.

"Ho-oh!" said Ondossi, leaping backwards. "Chunder time!" Harry had never heard that word before, but he knew exactly what it meant. It was as if his insides were punishing him for his crime, for casting the ultimate Unforgivable Curse. By the time he no longer had to retch, he was shaking so badly he could barely hold himself up.

"Good, then," she said, gathering him in her arms to guide him away from the puddle. "It's good that you're sick. I'm glad. Killing *should* make you sick. If it made more people sick, the world would be a better place." Just as she had done on the night they met, she conjured a blanket with her wand and covered him, bringing his head back to rest against her shoulder. She was chanting under her breath in her native language, which Harry couldn't understand but found strangely comforting nonetheless.

Eventually the warmth returned to his face, then his limbs, until only his hands were jangling with paraesthesias. It was getting rather dark, and the forest was no place to linger, but Ondossi laid her hand on his forehead. "Don't hurry to get up or you'll just collapse again," she said, and Harry knew she was right. Just his intention to stand made his forehead turn clammy.

"The forest isn't safe at night, Tura," he muttered hoarsely, thinking of Aragog's multitude of hungry offspring.

"Pfft," she sniffed. "I'm the scariest thing out here." Ondossi resumed her chant, resting the side of her face against his head. Harry could feel the song as well as hear it, the strange words resonating through the bones of his skull. He was nearly lulled to sleep by the time she stopped, leaving only the crickets to disturb the heavy quiet of the forest night.

"What were you singing?" asked Harry.

"I was thanking the mother finch for giving us her baby so that you could learn how to save us all."

Harry's stomach wrenched once again, not with nausea, but a twisting tension of overwhelming sorrow. A minute before, Harry felt he'd recovered enough to return to the castle, but he had passed only through the guilt and moral outrage. Now grief swept over him and he burst into great, racking sobs, drawing his arms and legs up against his chest as though to keep his heart from falling out of his rib cage. All the while, Ondossi curled her arm protectively across his shoulders, without singing or speaking or attempting to intervene until every tear was shed and all of his grief was spent.

"It's good that it hurts, too," she said quietly as his breathing finally returned to normal. "You'll be all right, Harry. You should fly back to the castle now, people are probably worried about you."

Harry broke in to a wry grin and pressed his head back briefly against Ondossi's throat. "Funny, that," he said. "I don't think I've ever felt safer in my life." He meant every word; after all the emotional upheaval, her warm, steady presence made him feel like a grizzly bear cub sheltered in its mother's paws.

She shifted to look him in the eye, regarding him with disbelief. "Really?"

"Yeah."

Her whole face softened in warmth and wonder at this admission. Harry did a double-take at her expression; he'd never really noticed that she perpetually wore a guarded, cynical scowl until it was absent. He sat up and turned to face her, and her wide, dark eyes no longer seemed empty or cold at all. Harry raised his hand to her cheek without thinking. When she caught her breath at the contact, he felt an unexpected but compelling impulse to lean forward and kiss her.

Although there was no Legilimency involved, a very rapid exchange of ideas seemed to take place between them and Ondossi leapt abruptly to her feet. "Bad idea," she mumbled, and promptly began trudging through the undergrowth toward the Hogwarts grounds.

Harry wasn't sure if she referred to his words or his intentions, but he didn't exactly relish the thought of asking her to clarify. Instead, he just followed her through the forest, tripping and stumbling over roots and vines in the darkness. He wondered how she managed to move so quietly through the unknown terrain when it dawned on him that she probably saw better at night than a cat. Moments later, this was confirmed when she stopped suddenly and crouched down, nearly sending Harry tumbling over her back.

"Oooh, walnuts!" she bubbled. "Yum! And you horfed up all your dinner, poor thing, I'll get some for you." Though Harry could barely see his own shoes under the forest canopy, he heard the clinking of what he assumed were walnuts as she gathered them into a fold in her robes.

"That's okay, Tura," he said, not at all eager to eat anything that grew in the Forbidden Forest. "I'll just get something from the kitchen later. Really."

"Huh? You can do that?" she asked, reaching up into the branches to pluck a nut from the tree.

"Um, yeah," said Harry. "The house-elves love to feed people, all you have to do is ask. You should have already known that, after all the snooping you've done in people's heads."

A walnut bounced off his head somewhat painfully. "You turkey!" she said. "I've had my fill of siphoning every random thought around me, thanks very much. I don't poke very far into unwilling minds unless I have to. I don't like that numb feeling afterwards. You saw the difference with your friend Ron. That's where the real power of your magic resides, Harry--that you can bring whatever's on their mind out into yours. If they're thinking about it already, so can you. It's only when you try to dig up stuff that's idle that it costs you."

Harry nodded. "That's why Ron didn't feel anything when I read him that day?"

"Exactly," said Ondossi. "It's almost like talking, when you just skim the surface. Except that you hear everything and they hear nothing." She paused, then added, "Which is *still* kind of like talking, with most people." She chuckled ruefully and resumed her quest for walnuts. "You don't have to hang around, you know, if you don't want any of these. I can find my way out."

"There's a reason this isn't called the Friendly Forest, Tura," Harry chided. "I don't think you should be out here alone."

"Hagrid comes out here alone all the time."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know. Hagrid's a bit mental in that respect."

"And I'm not?" Ondossi said, laughing. "You're talking to the wild child of the tundra, you know."

"I seem to recall that you weren't thrilled to learn there were centaurs out here," said Harry sternly. He felt vindicated at the sound of several earthy thumps as she dropped some of her walnuts in consternation.

"Right. Well, it's just a phobia, really," she said a bit shakily. "Snakes have a thing about big, heavy animals with hooves." Harry laughed, but his mirth was brought to a quick halt as another walnut hit his forehead, this time with considerably more force.

"Ow! You weren't kidding about your aim." Harry firmly resolved to duck immediately if he had another opportunity to tease her.

Her voice went suddenly serious. "Harry--you won't tell anyone about the snake thing, will you?"

Rubbing his forehead, he replied, "Um, well, I guess not... but why?"

"I told you, I wanted to be a wolf. I feel silly being a snake. I mean, I'm an Arctic reptile. How dumb is that? Below zero half the year and I'm cold-blooded."

"If I laugh," he asked, "are you going to throw another nut at me?" Ondossi snorted noncommittally. "It's not dumb," he finally said, forgoing any chuckling. "I don't think you have much choice anyway, you just turn into what comes most naturally to you."

"Great," she grumbled. "I'm a metaphor for a spitting snake from the tropics."

Harry knew he was in for it, but he couldn't stop himself from laughing out loud. "Yeah, who would ever have guessed?" he said, dodging behind a tree just in time to avoid a small, nutty hailstorm, though she was giggling as well.

When the assault faded, Harry gingerly stepped out of the ballistic shadow and picked up the few nuts he could see. "I still say it's silly to be shy about it. Besides, didn't you have to register?"

"Register? Where?" She sounded genuinely nonplussed.

"At the Ministry. Or with your own government. Animagi are supposed to register."

"You're kidding!" she spluttered. "Wow. We don't do that back home." She scoffed. "They can barely get a decent census every ten years, much less keep track of whose magic does what. Although maybe they do it down south, I don't know," she added thoughtfully. "Anyone tried that in Northpole, they'd be tarred and feathered."

Harry shook his head, smirking. "Santa's Little Helpers don't exactly respect authority, do they?"

"Bing," laughed Ondossi. "You'd fit right in."

Harry waited in resignation until Ondossi found all the "good" walnuts, then escorted her out of the Forest. She wanted to show Hagrid the walnuts, so Harry left her at the door of his cabin and darted off on his Firebolt straight to the Owlery. It was nearly empty since most of the owls were off hunting, so it made for an easy entrance into the Castle. Harry realized it had been some time since he'd seen Hedwig; she had grudgingly brought him his letter to himself a few weeks earlier and promptly disappeared again. He wondered if Fawkes could possibly make her see reason. *Fat chance*, he thought, and reckoned he'd better send away for a box of Owl Treats if he had any hope of making peace.

Harry donned his Invisibility Cloak and returned to Gryffindor Tower, narrowly avoiding Mrs. Norris at the foot of the Owlery stairs. Upon entering the portrait hole, however, he was immediately accosted by a very distressed Hermione, who had clearly been pacing around the common room, leaving a bevy of quivering first- and second-years in her wake.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, before he even had time to stuff his cloak into his pocket.

"With Ondossi. Didn't Ron tell you?"

"Yes, but Ron barely had time to talk--he and Ginny got called to McGonagall's office! Something's the matter, Harry, and I don't know what, and the suspense is unbearable!"

Harry's jaw dropped. "When?"

"Over an hour ago. He came back just before dark, and it's a good thing, too, because McGonagall had sent someone to bring him the moment he arrived. The last thing he needed was to get caught red-handed being out after dark! Anyway, it's been over an hour now and, well, you know it can't be good." Hermione wrung her hands anxiously. "Maybe you and Fawkes can look in on Bill like you did after the attacks on the Ministry," she whispered, bouncing rapidly on her toes to dissipate her nervous energy.

Harry shrugged his shoulders, pondering the idea. He wasn't quite sure how Fawkes had done it the first time. Fortunately, at that very moment, the portrait hole swung open again, and two red heads bobbed through it.

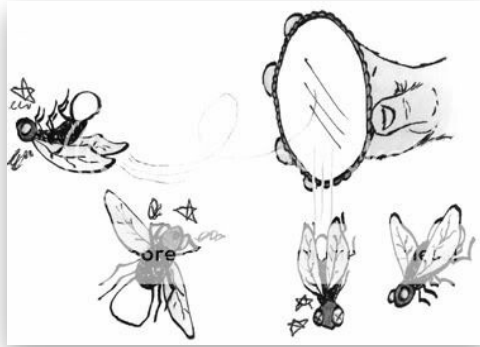
Hermione catapulted across the common room, gasping at their pale, dazed faces. "Oh my goodness, what is it?" she blurted.

Ginny looked as if she were about to cry, and not for the first time that evening. Both of them slumped into the nearest chair, then Ron spoke up weakly. "I never, ever, thought I'd say this, but... my dad's been appointed Minister of Magic."

## 18: Lessons in Humility

Chapter 18 of 50

Harry and Ron get a bit of comeuppance from a very small and unlikely source.



"You're joking," said Harry.

Ginny burst into tears, but Ron only shook his head. "I just can't believe it," he said. "All those worthless bullies sticking daggers in people's backs for years, and then climbing up the hilts to the top, and every last one of them suddenly takes their name out of the running and disappears. Until it's time to elect the new Minister, of course. Dad wasn't even at the meeting--they didn't send him the memo in time! What do you want to bet that wasn't an accident, eh?" Ron buried his face in his hands, rubbing his forehead.

Hermione was rendered speechless, plopping into a chair that had just been rapidly vacated by an insightful third-year student. Harry, however, was already clenching his fists with a murderous expression.

"How DARE they?" he shouted. "He can decline, can't he? Tell me he refused the appointment, Ron." But even as Harry asked, he knew the answer. Arthur had never expressed any ambition to become Minister, but he would never turn down such a challenge if he believed he could help others by accepting. "Morgan le Fay. He's taking it, isn't he?" Again, Harry didn't have to ask, but at least the sound of it in the air gave him something on which to focus.

"They can't do this!" said Hermione. "Surely there must be a rule against--"

"It's legal, Hermione," said Ron, his voice weary with defeat. "They declared a state of emergency when Scrimgeour was killed, which gives them the power to appoint the next Minister without the usual process. Dad could refuse, but that would pretty much end his career in the Ministry. And besides that, someone *else* would get railroaded into the job. Dad reckons he's the best prepared to handle it, out of all the people likely to get the shaft, so he's taking it."

Harry finally flopped into a chair as well, clutching his head as if it were about to explode. "But doesn't he understand what they're doing?"

"Of course he does!" wailed Ginny suddenly. "He knows bloody well that they're just using him as a target, to set Voldemort's sights on him and off their useless hides! Oh, why does every man I know have to be the world's biggest bloody hero?" She leapt to her feet and charged up the stairs to the girls' dormitory, followed immediately by Hermione.

Ron and Harry gave each other a glum look before each settled into their chairs for a furious, private brooding.

"What are we going to do?" Harry finally asked, though he didn't really expect an answer.

"I suppose what we talked about is pretty much out of the running," said Ron bleakly.

Harry grimaced, shaking his head. "I'm not ready. I thought I was, but I'm not." He paused. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's okay, mate. Mum really would have a paddy if I disappeared now. She's in a right state. You know that clock of hers with all our names on it? The minute they took the vote, the hand for Dad popped clean off."

"How's she taking it?" asked Harry.

"Oh, you know Mum," Ron sighed. "She'll stand right behind him like a rock, then go worry herself sick every day after he leaves for the office. She's trying to make a show of being proud of him, as though he's been promoted because he *deserves* it."

"He does deserve to be Minister, Ron," said Harry angrily. "Just not the way those prats gave it to him."

"Well, one thing's for sure," Ron said with a wry grin, "he's due for *abig* raise."

The Great Hall was already buzzing with the news by the time Harry, Ron, and Hermione arrived for breakfast the next morning. The *Daily Prophet* had a huge photo on the front page of Mr. Weasley, flanked by dozens of smiling toadies "showing their support" for the new Minister-to-be. Harry stared at the moving photograph for some time, convinced that if he watched carefully enough, he'd spot them plunging little silver daggers into each others' backs.

"Is this really true, Ron?" said Luna Lovegood, who rushed up to their back-to-back chairs as soon as she entered the Hall.

"Every word of it, except the lies," grouched Ron.

"Well, in that case, congratulations!" said Luna, quite sincerely. "How fabulous! Finally, a real person appointed as Minister! My dad would love to interview him for *The*

*Quibbler*. He's virtually unknown, you know, and people would love to hear his stand on all sorts of issues."

Harry and Ron exchanged a sour glance, each pondering the "issues" of interest to *The Quibbler*. "Yeah, well, I'll be sure to pass that along," said Ron. "He's bound to be pretty busy, though, so he may not be able to squeeze it in."

"Oh, that would be lovely! Thank you, Ron!" Luna tweaked the tip of Ron's nose and floated off to her usual seat at the front of the Great Hall. Harry silently admired the fact that Ron kept a straight face throughout the whole exchange.

Hermione didn't manage it as well, and opted to face her table and concentrate on her breakfast as the lesser of two impolite evils. That gave her a few moments to study the article about Mr. Weasley. When Luna left, Hermione quickly poked her head over the back of her chair with an purposefull expression. "Ron, it says here that your dad won't be sworn in for two weeks."

Ron nodded. "I know, it's some formality. But there's not going to be any talking him out of it, he's made up his mind on that score."

"That's not where I was heading. Harry, I think if we're going to do anything with that mirror, we need to take care of it before Ron's dad takes office."

Harry simply stared at her, too flummoxed by the non-sequitor to reply. Hermione rolled her eyes and began speaking more slowly. "The archway and the veil, Harry! Once Mr. Weasley is sworn in, he'll ultimately have to answer for anything that goes on within the Ministry. You can *bet* he'll be less than thrilled if we're caught tampering with that thing. And if something goes wrong... well, if we do it *now*, it's basically no one's fault, but if we do it once Mr. Weasley is in charge..."

Ron scoffed. "I don't think there's been so much as a leaky faucet in the Ministry that didn't cost *someone* points, Hermione. It'll probably still get back to Dad if we sneak in there now."

"Maybe, but it *certainly* will after he's sworn in! In fact, I don't think I'd want to do it--I'd feel like I was betraying him personally, making trouble in the Ministry when he's in charge."

"Believe me, he's used to it," said Ron. "The man raised Fred and George, remember? If anyone knows how to handle heat when he's supposed to be the boss, it's my dad."

"Lowering the boom on Fred and George for blowing up the toilet is one thing. But if his son got caught trespassing on Ministry property--in the Department of Mysteries, nonetheless! The *Prophet* would rip him to shreds!"

Harry smiled mischievously. "All the more reason to do it before he takes over. If we get caught, maybe we can get him disqualified from the post."

Ron's eyes widened. "You know, that just might work! I could be Family Hero, keeping Dad from becoming Minister!" He tilted his head and sat back in his chair. "Good grief, I can't believe I just said that."

Hermione let out a frustrated growl. "You two... well, regardless of the reason, do you agree we ought to get right to work on this?"

Both Harry and Ron nodded. "Good then," said Hermione smartly. "Now we just need to find that other mirror, get out of Hogwarts, sneak into the Ministry and try it out!" She grinned cheerfully and turned back to dig into her remaining breakfast with vigor.

Harry eyed Ron, who shrugged and grabbed a slice of toast. "Piece of cake," Ron muttered before chomping half of it in one bite.

By lunchtime, Ron was feeling rather fed up with all the attention he was receiving on account of his father's appointment. "Merlin's beard, Harry, what am I supposed to say to these people? Most of them are all smiles like this is a *good* thing! And the rest still look jealous. I think I might throttle the next person that says 'congratulations' and shakes my hand."

Harry reached immediately for Ron's hand and said, "Congratulations!"

"You git," Ron sneered, shoving Harry's hand away. "I could handle this whole spotlight business when we won the Quidditch Cup. At least that really was a good thing. But this stinks. Most of these people wouldn't give me the time of day a week ago, and now they act like we're the best of friends." Ron stuck out his tongue.

"Catching flies?" said Hermione as she took her usual seat nearby.

"Yeah, lunch was really bad," Ron replied without missing a beat.

"Well, it's good you're done early," Hermione said. "Today's Wednesday, after all." After a few seconds of silence, she glared over her shoulder at the two of them. "Wednesday? As in, 'Moral Support for Hagrid Day?' You haven't gone down to see him yet, and it's almost October."

Harry and Ron exchanged a pained grimace. "Oh, no you don't!" snapped Hermione immediately, wagging her fork at them. "Besides, I'm sure he'd like to talk about the news. If you go now, while it's still early, you can use the start of class as an excuse to leave." She rolled her eyes in exasperation over having to explain such an obvious tactic to the two of them, and turned back to her plate.

"You know, Ron," said Harry with an impish grin, "if we go and visit Hagrid now, just before class starts, we can--"

"*Silencio!*" said Hermione, pointing her wand over her shoulder without even looking. Harry's voice cut off abruptly, and Ron wisely kept his laughter to a very low volume.

The charm wore off about halfway to Hagrid's cabin, just in time for Harry to answer Hagrid's cheerful shout of greeting. Hagrid was bustling around at the edge of the forest, clearly preparing for his next class. He had a bundle of lethal-looking peppers in his hand, and Harry immediately guessed the topic of today's lesson. "Fireflies today, Hagrid?" he asked cheerfully.

Hagrid set the peppers down on a small folding table and began to untie them. "Yeah, 'fraid it'll be a short class, seein' as they gotta come back out tonight ter get their Flies. Then I'm havin' half of 'em hide and the res' have ter use the Flies teh find 'em. Too bad it's all gotta be done a' night, we could'a used the great outdoors, but it'll still be alright in the castle. It'll be pretty in there, all the Flies zippin' about in the corridors. I jus' hope we'll have time fer both groups ter hide tonight."

As Hagrid rattled on cheerfully about his lesson plan, a little candle suddenly went on over Harry's head. "Hagrid... do you think Ron and I could join your class for this lesson?"

Hagrid's smile widened until it threatened to overtake his earlobes. "Yeh really mean that, Harry? You two wanner be part o' my class again?"

Ron, who was standing behind Harry, had managed to hook the waistband of Harry's underwear through his robe and was clearly threatening to give him an atomic wedgie, but Harry ignored him. "Sure, Hagrid! I saw your memory of the technique, after all; I'd like to give it a try myself!"

Beaming, Hagrid gave Harry the pepper he'd just untied. "We're meetin' inna Entrance Hall at sunset, Harry. Ron, you dig up somethin' small o' yers teh give 'em the scent."

As they walked away, Ron quietly demanded, "Have you gone spare?"

Harry winked. "No worries, Ron, there's a method in my madness. If I've got this right, those Fireflies are going to lead us straight to Kreacher's hiding place."

As the sun disappeared below the horizon, Harry left the Gryffindor common room and met the handful of seventh-years in Hagrid's class at the entrance to the castle. Hagrid marched them down to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. "Lucky it's been a warm fall, there's still lots of 'em aroun'. Come now, set out yer bait an' get back a bit, they'll be comin' along before yeh know it."

That was a bit of an exaggeration, but pale flickering lights eventually appeared in the lower branches, and soon after that a number of Flies took interest in Harry's pepper. When it was covered in glowing Flies, Harry tossed a handkerchief over it and collected his little swarm. He wished he'd had some of these fellows when he'd walked through the Forest with Ondossi. With a bit of their light, Harry could have caught those walnuts she was tossing like so many Snitches.

Ron was waiting for him just inside the oak front doors, having a bit of a staring match with Filch. The caretaker was most displeased that he was required to let Hagrid's students out after dark, and naturally insisted that they present for inspection upon entering the castle. He eyeballed Ron as though he expected him to make a headlong charge for freedom at any moment. As Harry came in, Ron made a slight feint toward the entrance and Filch leapt to his feet, only to scowl menacingly when Ron merely leaned over and picked up a scrap of parchment from the floor. "What a blooming git," commented Ron quietly as the two of them headed downstairs.

A small crowd of house-elves welcomed them into the kitchen with plates of buttered rolls and cake (which both Ron and Harry felt honor-bound to accept graciously). The elves weren't thrilled by their request for a dark space in which to prepare the Fireflies. Harry felt a bit guilty as he monitored their anxious discussion; they were appalled by the idea of deliberately introducing insects into their kitchens. He turned to Ron, who nodded in resigned agreement. A clean kitchen was a rather nice thing.

Dobby saved the day when he burst into the main scullery. "Harry Potter! They told me you was visiting! Of course Harry Potter may use the kitchen in any way he requires," Dobby said with a sharp glare to all the elves present. There were a few dissenting grimaces, but none of the elves spoke up. Apparently Dobby's status as a free agent had won him a position of authority.

"Thanks, Dobby," said Harry as the elf escorted them to his own sleeping quarters, a roomy nook in a storeroom with two wooden window shutters for doors. It was a bit reminiscent of Harry's cupboard under the stairs at Privet Drive. "We've got a plan to find the things that Kreacher took. We just need a few minutes to prepare the Fireflies. You wouldn't have an oil lamp, would you?"

"Dobby can find one, of course, Harry Potter," said the elf, but Harry noticed the slightest furrow between his spherical eyes.

"Is something wrong, Dobby?" he asked.

The furrow immediately vanished, but Harry could still see a trace of... something in Dobby's eyes. Resentment? Harry had never seen Dobby indicate displeasure before, and he found it rather chilling. "Dobby... what's on your mind?" he asked cautiously.

Dobby looked back up and opened his mouth as if to speak, but sighed and drooped his ears instead. "It is nothing, sir. Dobby knows there was no offense meant, sir."

Harry's mouth fell open. "No, Dobby, there wasn't! But you have to explain--I don't even know what I said to offend you!" But even as he spoke, Harry recognized that this was the same peculiar emotional state he was in when he was able to skim the surface of Ron's thoughts: a bit of disappointment, a smattering of regret, and a hopeful optimism about future success. He didn't need Dobby to tell him (and the elf certainly seemed reluctant to do so), he could just lift the answer from Dobby's mind.

Harry peered at the elf's huge green eyes. Within seconds, his vision dimmed slightly; the process was beginning--

The next thing Harry saw was the bottom of a rack of pots and pans hanging from the kitchen, completely framed by an oval ring of enormous, concerned pairs of eyeballs. "How did I..." Harry mumbled, realizing that the back of his head hurt sharply.

Ron's voice carried from somewhere outside the ring of eyes. "You've been out for twenty minutes, Harry. Dropped like a stone, for no reason we could see. You okay?"

Harry groaned, gingerly patting the goose-egg on the back of his head. "Been better. Why am I back out in the kitchen?"

"I told the elves if you didn't wake up, they could serve you for breakfast tomorrow," said Ron wryly. Dozens of scandalized house-elves glared at Ron in indignation and horror. "Easy, easy, just a joke! We wanted to give you some air. It was a compromise, so they wouldn't nip off and fetch Madam Pomfrey."

*Good thinking, Ron,* Harry mused silently. This was getting ridiculous, all these delays. Harry sat up, ignoring the new headache this produced. "I'm all right, really, I think I know what happened. Where's Dobby?"

"I don't think he left his, uh, room," said Ron, sidling up next to Harry to give him a hand up. "He's pretty upset--he thinks he hurt you."

"Oh, no," groaned Harry. "He's not banging his head, is he?"

There were no thumping sounds emanating from Dobby's nook, but the elf did not answer their knock. Harry finally pulled open one of the shutters to find that Dobby had twisted his ears up so tightly that they looked like braids. He practically leapt into Harry's arms when he saw him.

Harry patted the creature's papery skin and gently unfurled the ears until Dobby had calmed down enough to speak coherently. "Harry Potter, Dobby would rather die than--"

Harry put his hand over Dobby's mouth. "Shh," he crooned soothingly. "It's all right, Dobby. It was my own fault. I tried to use Legilimency on you, and I think it backfired."

Sniffing, Dobby said, "Dobby doesn't know about Wizarding arts like Legilimency. No one has ever tried such a thing on Dobby."

Harry attempted to smooth the crumpled ears. "There's a lot I don't know about it either," he admitted. "But all's fine again, so let's get back to the point. Now, I'd asked for a lamp, and that bothered you. Why?"

Dobby averted his gaze with an air of shame or humiliation. Harry glanced at Ron, who shrugged. Both of them stared at Dobby with concealed impatience for some time before the little elf finally spoke, his eyes never leaving the floor of his cubbyhole.

"Harry Potter knows that a gift of clothing will free a house-elf from his master, but that is only one of our customs." Dobby's voice became gravelly. "There are many more, which Harry Potter has never learned, because he has never kept one of us under his thumb. Harry Potter asked if Dobby had a lamp. For a moment, Dobby felt insulted by this question, but that was foolish!"

Fearing a new auricular onslaught, Harry reached protectively for the ears again. Dobby dropped his hands into his lap, sighed, and continued. "Harry Potter would not try to insult Dobby, no, not ever. Not on purpose. He just didn't know that, like clothes, house-elves doesn't own lamps."

Harry raised his brows. "But I see house-elves carrying lamps all the time."

"Carrying them for master, yes, sir, and to light fires to cook master's food or warm master's bed. But not to keep in their own quarters. Even Dobby, who was set free by Harry Potter, does not presume to own a lamp."

"Why not?"

Dobby cleared his throat. "A rule from hundreds of years ago, sir. If master wishes an elf to work at night, he will provide enough light. If it is dark, an elf is supposed to sleep until it's time to work again."

Harry frowned. "But it gets dark early in the winter! What if you finish your work and you're not tired yet? You're not allowed to play a game, or read?"

Dobby's hand flew over his mouth as though Harry had uttered something blasphemous. "That is *exactly* why house-elves doesn't keep lamps, sir. Elves are forbidden to read!"

Not just Harry's jaw, but his whole head fell forward in shock. "Not allowed to read?! Says who?"

"Dobby told you, this has been the rule for centuries. Elves *work*, Harry Potter. Time spent *reading* is time wasted from their chores, or from getting the proper rest before the next chore. And worse than that, reading leads to *thinking*. Ideas." Dobby's squeaky voice dropped in both volume and pitch. "Slaves who thinks and has ideas does not make good slaves, Harry Potter."

Harry's chest tightened uncomfortably, and one look at Ron showed that his was doing the same. The pidgin English most elves spoke, their limited comprehension of concepts like freedom and payment, their intense distrust of changes to the status quo--all of these made sense now. Most elves lived alone with their masters, or perhaps one or two other servants. Isolated by silence, unable to even send an owl once in a while, they could go an entire lifetime in ignorant despair, never knowing any code of conduct besides the one their Wizard masters imposed upon them.

"Dobby," Harry said quietly, but was too conscience-stricken to continue.

The elf looked up at last with a wan smile. "Dobby will fetch a lamp for Harry Potter right away, sir."

Harry silently watched him depart, then turned to Ron. "Ever get the feeling that maybe the world would be better off without any wizards at all?" Ron said nothing, but nodded grimly.

Harry felt his face flush heatedly. *All right, I never listened to Hermione, I just looked the other way, but now I know better* he thought. *I'm going to do something about this. I'll buy Dobby a lamp while we're down in London, and some early reader books.* Just planning out a redress for this unscrupulous "rule" helped him feel better; the tightness in his chest dissipated at last into a comfortable warmth.

"Ron, I think--" Harry began, sitting up straighter, but to his great surprise, Ron was staring at him, agape. At that moment, the warmth became painfully hot and Harry caught a whiff of smoke. "Mother of Merlin, the *Fireflies*!"

Any lingering fantasies Harry had of quickly finding Kreacher's stash were immediately quashed. Harry scrambled to get out of his smoldering robe, trying desperately not to crush the Flies. This was not easy, since he was crouching inside a cupboard. Ron, seated against the opposite wall, quickly took out his wand and cast the *Aguamenti* spell before Harry could stop him.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" Harry shouted desperately, turning his back to shield the Flies from the stream of water. Even one drop would douse their lights! Of course, protecting the little blighters took several precious seconds from his attempt to disrobe, at the price of his shirt. By the time he managed to yank the robe down from his shoulders, even his nice silk Gryffindor tie was singed.

But that didn't end the chaos. No longer personally on fire, Harry had time to realize that the Flies finished their pepper and therefore had no more reason to stick around. Harry tossed fold after fold of his robe over them frantically, hoping to keep them trapped under the layers until the lamp arrived. With one foot he tugged at the shutters, hoping to slow down the flies when the robe gave out, but that only sealed he and Ron in the cupboard with the acrid smoke. Almost immediately, the two of them were forced, coughing and gasping, to half roll, half crawl from Dobby's nook.

About that time it dawned on Harry that the robe he'd left to the mercy of the Fireflies still had things in its pockets--his Invisibility cloak, the Marauder's Map, and Sirius's mirror, to name a few! He reached for his wand to perform an extinguishing spell--it might kill the Flies, but those other things were just too valuable--and realized his wand was in the robe as well. Rudely yanking Ron's wand from his hand, Harry pointed it at the burning heap and croaked, "*Flammafrigus*!" It was the spell used by witches in the Middle Ages who were being burned at the stake, to cool the flames to a tolerable temperature. Once again he owed Hermione for her most excellent History of Magic notes.

Thus poor Dobby returned with a lamp to find smoke billowing from his tidy little cubbyhole, a huge ashy puddle in the center of his mattress, and Harry buried to his elbows in what looked like a campfire. Dobby's eyes bulged out further than ever before, but Harry and Ron were too busy extinguishing Harry's finest possessions to notice. When the wizards sat back, panting with stunned looks upon their faces, Dobby's ears, shoulders, and even his long thin nose had sagged and drooped until he rather resembled a waxworks model of himself (one which had been left out in the hot sun too long).

Harry winced guiltily at the sight of the flabbergasted elf, but there was no time yet for apologies. The Flies had not yet emerged from the cinders of his robe, so there was still a chance to pull this off. Harry took the lamp from Dobby's unresisting hand, lit it from the last burning remnants of his clothes, and lowered the wick. He quickly noxed the three small sconces on the walls of the storeroom and conjured a black curtain to cover the arched entrance.

The Flies began exploring the storeroom slowly and silently, meandering among the shelves like glowing butterflies. Harry hoped it wouldn't take long for one of them to discover the waning lamplight. He turned at last to Dobby (or at least in the direction he believed Dobby occupied).

"Dobby? I know this looks terrible, but I promise, I'll fix it all up--"

"Harry Potter is being silly!" said Dobby, poorly disguising the distress in his voice. "House-elves cleans up messes, sir, and this is just another mess. Harry Potter mustn't fret about it one more minute. You sirs go on about your business and don't give Dobby another thought."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but now that his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he could see Dobby's face. The poor fellow looked as though he'd rather return to Malfoy Manor than allow Harry in his sleeping-nook again. Harry sighed, vowing to find an exceptional lamp for Dobby at the next opportunity, and perhaps a new bed as well.

A Fly floated past the dying lamp and burst into a loud buzz. The remaining Flies rushed to rally around it, humming loudly in their concern. "Finally!" Harry muttered. The Fireflies were hooked--they would not wander off until their "companion" was safe once more. "Worst is over!" Harry said brightly to Ron and Dobby, but neither of them looked any cheerier. Harry set his jaw and pawed around until he found the mirror.

"Now it's just a matter of imprinting them with the scent," Harry said to no one in particular as he fetched the mirror. "All Hagrid did was hold the comb near them and let each one touch it. The trick is keeping track of which ones have 'hit.' I can see why he only picked three at a time." Harry had assumed that "the more, the merrier" applied to Fireflies, and had trapped closer to fifteen of the insects under his handkerchief. *That probably explains why they went through the pepper so quickly*, he noted inwardly as he unwrapped the mirror from the strip of cloth he'd wound around it to protect it.

The first Fly to notice the mirror zipped over to it encouragingly, but stopped a hand's breadth from it and hovered, staring intently. Harry frowned; Hagrid's Flies hadn't seemed to notice the comb at all, even when Hagrid brushed it against their glittery wings. Another Fly joined the first, then another, all stopping and hovering. Harry tried to move the mirror toward them, but the Flies simply backed up and kept their distance. He then pulled it away, hoping they would give chase and overtake it, but again, the Flies simply followed it in perfect synchrony with his movement. A fourth one caught sight of the mirror and joined in.

"What's the matter with you blokes?" Harry wondered aloud. "This isn't at all how they acted with Hagrid," he continued, almost apologetically.

Ron screwed up his face thoughtfully. "You know, it's almost like they're dancing with it. Maybe they think their reflection's another Fly."

"Could be," said Harry. "They're probably just sizing up the new fellows."

"Or maybe they're wondering why the new Flies aren't down there, helping the lamp," said Ron ominously. Harry groaned. The Flies in the mirror must seem like a bunch of

snobs, milling about up here while there was a friend in need. That was *not* a good impression for them to make about the mirror! He quickly yanked it away.

As if on cue, the four hurled themselves at the mirror in unison, determined to teach those jerks some manners. There was a startlingly loud thud as four hard little heads rammed the glass. One Fly fell to the ground, its little rump dimming to a pale red. One of the others dove protectively after it, while the remaining two geared up for a second strike.

Harry tried to turn the mirror away from them, but the little fellows were lightning fast and followed the face of the mirror as if glued to it on an invisible stalk. Another thud and the two Flies rebounded in irregular spirals through the air, clearly a bit punch-drunk from the assault. Harry flattened the mirror against his chest before had a chance to recover.

"Well, that went as well as could be expected," said Ron glumly. "I don't think you want them spreading the news to the rest of the crowd, Harry."

Harry groaned. "Merlin's beard, no. They probably imprinted on the mirror already; the last thing we need is for them to tell the others it's an enemy! Ron, can you conjure up a net really quick? My wand's still in the pile."

Ron did so, and scooped up the dazed Fly still lolling on the floor. He tossed the little fellow out of the storeroom, its faithful companion following with an angry buzz. The others were now flashing around the room at high speed, determined to find the traitors and give them a good thrashing. With a more athletic effort, Ron managed to trap one of them, but his net only lasted a fraction of a second before the Fly incinerated it and continued on its vengeful way. Ron faced toward Harry, but his eyes were crossed in pure vexation.

"Think you can make one out of metal?" Harry pleaded.

Ron distorted his face even more. "Morgan le Fay, Harry, I'm glad Hermione's not here, we'd never hear the end of being dumber than bugs." Ron's first attempt to conjure a woven wire net failed miserably, the fibers becoming tangled and stretched to the breaking point. With a snort of frustration, he started anew with very fine chain mail. Harry watched in admiration; this was one of the most meticulous spells he'd ever seen Ron perform.

"No, now you've got to bring the edges in--link two at a time with one ring," he prompted, as the net reached a nice depth.

Ron, whose forehead was beginning to ache from the concentration, waved at Harry to shut him up. "Be still!" he grunted, focusing intently on the final few rows, interweaving larger jump rings with the tiny loops to close the net with an elegant series of pleats and darts. Ron sealed it shut by running a single wire through the end loops, cinching it tight with a triumphant flick of his wand.

"Woohoo!" Harry howled appreciatively, slugging the air victoriously with his free fist. "You're wasted on those houses of cards, mate, that was some wicked magic!"

Ron nodded, turning the net over in his hands and giving it a few experimental swishes. "It *is* good, innit? Think I'll make a full-size version or two for my beloved brothers. Dangle them from the ceiling of their own shop. Now *that's* funny, what'cha say, Harry?" Ron beamed impishly.

"You could open your own place right next door. 'Weasley's Revenge On Wheezy Wizards.'"

Ron gazed wistfully, imagining the torture he would inflict on Fred and George if he had a life-size chainmail sack for each of them. He snapped out of his reverie. "Well, enough of that. I've had all I'm going to stand of these bloody Flies for one night. *Engard*, insects!" he bellowed, flourishing the net like a rapier.

Even Dobby eventually lapsed into giggles as he and Harry watched Ron's prolonged but relentless pursuit of the Fireflies. They had revved themselves up into a frenzy and were bouncing around the ceiling like laser blasts in a Muggle movie, with Ron leaping from shelves and crates in his attempts to ensnare them. When he finally captured one Fly, the momentum from the creature's great speed nearly ripped the net from his grasp.

Harry burst out laughing as Ron quickly flipped the little beast out of the storeroom. "What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Harry lied unconvincingly. "Just for a second there, it looked as though it would just keep going, with you flapping after it, hanging on for dear life..."

"Laugh while you can, monkey boy," muttered Ron darkly, and resumed his pursuit.

After finally turning out the last meteoric Fly, Ron calmly scooped most of the remaining would-be Good Samaritans from their vigil around the oil lamp, shoving them beyond the curtain despite their squeaks of protest. Two remained anxiously tending the tiny flame, apparently not even noticing that their companions had disappeared. "There," said Ron with a defiant huff. "Now we've got a manageable number."

Harry nodded. "All right, then, I guess what I need to do is hold the mirror backwards and make sure they don't see themselves, right?" He hoped that would work, anyway. After all this trouble, Harry's confidence in his Firefly Management skills had dwindled away to nothing.

Luck at last seemed to favor them. The Flies paid no more attention to the dull side of the mirror than they had to Sirius's baby comb. When Harry was certain that each fly had bumped against the mirror at least once, he brought it up next to the lamp and raised the wick.

The little gleeful sounds the Flies made were so droll that Harry, Ron, and Dobby all cooed over them like new fathers over their babies. All three smirked in embarrassment, but it couldn't be helped; the little blighters were *cute* when they cooperated. To everyone's relief, both Flies immediately landed on the mirror and began rubbing it gratefully with their forelegs.

"Set it down, Harry!" said Ron. "You don't want them bumping into your fingers!"

Harry laid the mirror on the floor by the lamp and leaned back against a sack of flour. "Well. I hope I never do that again for the rest of my life."

"Eh, now you've got all the bugs worked out, so to speak, next time it'll be a piece of cake!" gaffed Ron, poking Harry's shin with the end of the net. "And I've got this lovely thing that I made. Maybe I can get extra credit for it in Conjuring."

Harry smiled and leaned his head back against the flour sack to enjoy a window of quiet after all the chaos, glimpsing Ron doing the same as he closed his eyes. Harry finally noticed that between the smoke in his face and the smack he'd received on the back of his head earlier that evening, he had quite a headache.

The sweetly crooning Flies on the mirror were almost enough to soothe the tension away, but Harry knew this was no time to relax. He asked Dobby to bring him a glass of water, feeling guilty that the poor elf had returned to such a disaster from his last errand, but it couldn't be helped. Harry knew that water from the *Aguamenti* spell would fade away once the magic wore off, and he didn't know how long it would take the Flies to find the other mirror. If this mirror resurfaced, they'd simply return to it and the hunt would have to start over from the beginning.

Dobby brought the water quite quickly and Harry was about to submerge the mirror when he stopped short. "Ron, I just remembered something. If Kreacher's den isn't down here, these Flies may leave in a big hurry! Hagrid followed them on a thestral when they were looking for Sirius. I think I better get my Firebolt before starting the hunt." Harry suddenly felt crestfallen. "You, uh, want your broom?"

Ron lowered his eyebrows in a brooding stare. "Hah. You know the Cleansweep can't get half the speed you can. You're on your own if it comes to that, mate."

"Sorry, Ron. I forgot. You can try..." Ron wrinkled his nose cynically, and Harry stopped asking. He knew he'd have trouble keeping up even on the Firebolt if those Flies really opened throttle.



Tossing on the Invisibility cloak, Harry slunk up to Gryffindor Tower, where he changed out of his burnt shirt and soaked, ashy pants. He settled on plain Muggle jeans and a warm sweater, realizing that he'd just burnt up his second set of robes in two months. Fawkes eyed him knowingly from his preferred perch on the headboard of Harry's bed. He must have smelled the ashes and smoke, because he looked downright smug. Apparently Fawkes found it ludicrous that a lesser flame than his own would presume to touch Harry. *Tell that to my best tie*, Harry mused.

Harry finally returned to the dungeons with his broomstick and a backpack in tow, having surprised everyone in the common room by descending from the boys' dormitory when they had all thought (correctly) that he was out with Ron. "Okay, I'm ready for anything. Let's get this started," he said. The Flies were still fawning over the mirror, but their humming had faded and they looked a bit bored with their unresponsive new friend. He picked up the mirror and prepared to dunk it, but a nervous little cough from Dobby rattled his concentration.

Harry peered at the elf, who looked dangerously close to attacking his ears again. He immediately suppressed a groan. "Oh, Dobby, of course, I'll set to work on your bedroom as soon as I get back--"

"Oh, no, sir, Harry Potter, sir, that's not it at all, sir," said Dobby anxiously. "Dobby will see to that. It's just that..." The elf looked as though he'd rather bite his own tongue than speak at that point.

"What is it now, Dobby?" said Harry, immediately wishing he'd phrased it more gently.

"It's just that... Dobby told all the other elves that it was all right for Harry Potter to bring his insects into the kitchens because Dobby knows sir would never, ever make troubles on purpose. But now most of the Flies is not with Harry Potter anymore..."

Harry and Ron groaned as one, but Ron spoke up. "Now there are at least a dozen Flies snooping around and thinking this might make a nice cozy new home. Okay, Dobby." Ron pulled himself to his feet. "I'll take them outside." Harry gave Ron a look of total gratitude. "How about you get me a pot with a lid to put them in?" said Ron to the elf. "Chasing them down will be bad enough, but carrying them one by one up the stairs to let them out is just plain silly."

"A pepper in the pot would help too," added Harry.

Alone at last with the Fireflies, Harry picked up the mirror and gently shook them off. He immediately dunked the mirror in the water glass and hid it behind Dobby's shutters just to be sure. If they happened to spot their reflections in the mirror through the water glass, Merlin only knew what they might do.

While Harry scooped his things into the backpack, the Flies slowly began to circle one another in a rising column. Harry held his Firebolt at the ready and shook out his Invisibility Cloak, just in case. The Flies began to spiral faster, and he mounted the broom in anticipation.

Suddenly both Flies headed straight for him, alighting on his forehead and nuzzling him like a long-lost cousin. "Not me, you idiots!" He pushed the Flies from his head, but they immediately landed on his neck. "No!" he growled, wiping them off again. "I'm not your buddy. Go look for someone else." The Flies tried landing on each ear, then his nose, then finally the top of his head (with one becoming so tangled in his hair that it required a considerable effort to extract the little fellow). Harry was ready to swat them by that point, but fortunately, they gave up on him at last and returned to their midair spiral to discuss their next tactic.

They were clearly picking up speed. Harry pointed his wand the doorway and said, "*Finite Conjurum*" to remove the curtain. The Flies darted out through the arch and through the kitchens at a rapid pace, and Harry suddenly recalled that Hagrid had opened a window back in the Leaky Cauldron to let his Flies outside. *Oh, no*, he thought, and launched his broom with all the acceleration it could muster.

He made it to the kitchen entrance before the Flies and opened the painting before they burned through it, but things were not so smooth at the oak front doors. Filch had suspected that some Flies might want out during the evening; he was standing right beside the entrance with a bucket of water. In desperation, Harry aimed his wand while still flying up the stairs (no easy feat at that speed), and launched a charm to open the door. Sparks shot from his wand and reached the door before the Flies, preserving the ancient oak from a burning assault, but Filch, in a fury, tossed his pail of water at them anyway.

Once again Harry's clothes were soaked, but the quest was truly on at last, and thanks to the Invisibility Cloak and a determined silence, the caretaker had no idea what had really blasted out through that door. Harry heard Filch shout, "Peeves! I'll get you for this!" as he rose in the air, cold and wet but free.

## 19: Be Careful What You Seek

*Chapter 19 of 50*

... because the quest may take you on places you never imagined. Harry discovers a number of things during his pursuit of the lost mirror.



Twinkling lights danced at the limit of Harry's vision. The Fireflies were outpacing him. Harry pressed his body against the broomstick to minimize drag as much as possible, but the Firebolt simply could not keep up. The gap between he and the Flies was growing wider. To make matters worse, the insects were content to cruise just above the treetops. At this speed, Harry felt a constant nagging fear that some unexpectedly tall obstacle would flatten him into a pancake at any moment.

A rather Hermionesque voice in the back of his mind began to speculate that perhaps another night, another pepper, and some better preparation might be the wisest course, but Harry had been through too much to accept defeat. He wondered if he could Apparate while riding the broomstick, just far enough to catch up to the Flies. *Not at this speed*, he finally decided. He had to concentrate just to stay on the Firebolt; there was no way he could focus sufficiently to Apparate.

Harry thought he'd lost the Flies on the horizon, but he spotted them again after they'd moved beyond the lights of a small village. This was ridiculous. Harry was sure they were headed for London; he couldn't hope to track them through the lights of the city. He could stop now and apparate to Grimmauld Place. Where else would Kreacher keep his possessions? *Where, indeed.* The little git proved he wasn't bound to the house when he visited Malfoy Manor and tried to betray the entire Order. And besides, Dobby had searched Sirius's--no, his--no, Lupin's--house quite thoroughly, Harry was certain of that.

Poor Dobby. His whole bedroom had been destroyed on account of these stupid Flies, and now Harry was going to lose them! He wrapped one arm firmly around the broom handle, freeing his other hand to pull in some folds of his cloak that were flapping in the wind. Every ounce of drag was his enemy tonight. His shoulders were aching from the effort of steadying the broom, and it still wasn't fast enough!

*But what if I slow them down?*

The idea hit Harry out of the blue. What good was it to be a Legilimagus if you couldn't get into the minds of a couple of Flies and suggest they cool their afterburners a tad? For a moment, Harry laughed out loud at his narrow view of the solution up until that point. But then he realized he hadn't the slightest idea how to contact the mind of an insect half a mile off and zooming away from him.

He had to try. Harry climbed a few hundred feet to ensure a clear flight path, though it cost him an even greater lag behind the Flies. He could actually see them a bit better from above, but only because the moors were so empty and dark. Harry stared at them, envisioning their multifaceted eyes, their tiny little heads encasing what passed for a brain in the insect world. His own eyes began to lose their focus, it was working, he could feel himself stretching out to make the contact--

Directly in front of him, a fireball exploded.

There was no time to comprehend what happened, let alone react to it. The shock wave flipped Harry's broom in midair, but his momentum carried him through the actual flames so quickly that he barely felt the warmth. The broomstick was spinning like a drunken gyroscope, however, and Harry was forced to slow down and regain control. By the time he leveled off again, he was no more than fifteen feet from the ground. The Fireflies were nowhere to be seen.

Fawkes landed on the front of Harry's broomstick with a gusty flap of his crimson wings, peering over his sharp bill with a look of unmistakable reproach.

"What was that all about?" Harry demanded. "Now I've lost them!" Fawkes made no sound, but wriggled his tail insolently. "Oh, for the love of Merlin," said Harry crossly, "this had better be important. I've spent all evening working with those Flies, and now I'll have to start over." Harry glared angrily at the phoenix, but when it came to expressions of unctious disdain, Fawkes could beat Hedwig, McGonagall, and Ondossi *combined*.

Harry finally landed the Firebolt, as it was clear that Fawkes wouldn't relent until he'd accomplished his objective (whatever *that* was). As soon as Harry tried to stand, he discovered his legs were shaking from the effort of controlling the broomstick. Fortunately, the ground was dry when his knees gave out beneath him.

He glanced over at the phoenix, who had watched his collapse with an expression of mild curiosity. "All right, fine. I was pushing the broom a bit. But I had it under control! And if you'd given me ten more seconds to reach out to those Flies--"

Fawkes cut him off with a very loud, angry screech that would surely fuel the local legends of terrible beasts haunting the moors. For a moment, Harry just gaped at the phoenix, stunned that such an ugly sound came from him. "You're getting a temper, mate," he finally said.

Snorting, Fawkes let go of the broomstick and trundled over to Harry in the lurching manner of a creature unused to walking. He clambered into Harry's lap and looked him sternly in the eye, fanning his long tail flat onto the ground. Harry cringed. "Something tells me I'm about to get an earful, so to speak."

There were no words, not even images, but the phoenix was definitely in his mind. Harry was overcome with grief, the unbearable sorrow of an immortal confronting another's death. Then images came, at first hazy and indistinct, then extraordinarily clear. He saw himself flying at top speed on the Firebolt, as he'd been only minutes earlier. Harry watched his own eyes close in concentration as he sought the minds of the Fireflies. His head suddenly lolled to the side, and then he was simply gone.

He'd literally flown off the broomstick; at that speed, the instant he relaxed, his body became a sail smashing into a headwind. He watched himself plummet, his limbs flapping uselessly in free fall. Strangely, even though it was dark and his body was becoming smaller and smaller in the distance, Harry could still see every detail as if the body was merely shrinking, rather than falling away. His eyes never opened as he fell, not even when he struck the ground and disintegrated.

Harry was jolted back to reality by another angry screech from Fawkes, who poked his bill right up against Harry's nose. The phoenix leveled him with an expectant glare, but for some time, "Oh" was all Harry could manage to say out loud.

*That was my future, wasn't it? You're a Seer--the real thing, what Trelawney wishes she could be.* Fawkes made no sound, but Harry knew the answer. "You Saw it, and you came to save me. Fawkes." It was hard to know exactly how to hug a bird; their wings were sort of like arms, after all, but folded up at their sides in a rather standoffish way as far as hugs were concerned. Nonetheless, Harry threw his arms around Fawkes and stroked his thin, delicate neck. The phoenix finally relented, settling into Harry's lap with an affectionate trill.

Harry's whole body was shaking, both from the exhausting flight and the raw nerves from witnessing the death he'd barely escaped, but Fawkes was warm and light and comforting. Harry slumped onto his back and gazed at the stars. "You know, this is exactly what I was doing last night. Sitting out in the middle of nowhere with someone who'd just saved my life." Fawkes waddled up onto Harry's chest and roosted again, shaking his tail as he settled in. "Maybe I do need to slow down. But every minute I wait... the next one could be Remus. Or Mr. Weasley." He snorted. "Or both of them, most likely. They're probably the next thing in Voldemort's to-do box."

Harry sighed as Fawkes began tugging delicately at his hair, apparently trying to put it in order. "Don't bother," he advised the phoenix, pushing the bill away gently. "You could straighten it all night and it'll still look exactly the same. Trust me." Fawkes made a sound that resembled a hiccup, but he laid his head on Harry's shoulder in apparent agreement.

When Harry finally stopped shaking and his legs no longer felt like rubber, he gave Fawkes a quick tap on the shoulder. Fawkes needed no further prompt, hopping off Harry with a casual flap of his wings. *We're already starting to understand each other, just like Hagrid said*, thought Harry. That was a cheering thought.

Harry sat up, patting the ground beside him for the Firebolt. "Well, Fawkes, I suppose there's nothing for it but to go home. At least we can fly together some more. That'll be nice, won't it?" He found the broom and prepared to mount up, but Fawkes sat still on the ground, his tail spread out again. Harry furrowed his brow and leaned down, looking the phoenix in the eye. "You fan your tail when you have something to say to me, don't you? Not that you talk to me, that is. When you have something you want me to think about," Harry corrected himself.

Fawkes gazed at him with a bright expression, then stretched out his long neck such that it paralleled the handle of Harry's broomstick. Harry cocked his head with a puzzled grin. "What are you up to?" he wondered aloud, but once again he inexplicably *knew* the answer. Somewhat stiffly, Harry took the Firebolt in both hands and held it down before Fawkes. The phoenix stepped upon the handle and perched comfortably, then opened his scarlet wings and draped them over Harry.

Furthering the Muggle legends about the will-o-the-wisp haunting the moor, the wizard and his familiar disappeared in a burst of blue flame.

It was a bit of a stretch to call it "Apparating," as it felt nothing like the warped compression of the Wizard transportation. It was more like doing Legilimency, actually, except that flames were involved. Harry seemed to step out of himself, not into a new mind but a new *place*, while his body simply burned up and formed anew when he reached

the destination. Harry peered skeptically at Fawkes, who warbled at him innocently. The sensation that he'd just been reconstructed out of fresh ingredients was rather disconcerting, but he was pleased to see that for a change, he still had all of his clothes.

"Where are we?" Harry said as he looked around. It was cloudy and quite dark, but he spotted a distant Muggle street lamp that he recognized almost immediately. He groaned. They were in the cemetery of Godric's Hollow--the lamp illuminated the gated entrance to the grounds. "Of course. The Fireflies. They'd look for my dad next, it was his mirror to begin with."

There was no sign of their lights up on the hillside yet. Fawkes climbed onto Harry's shoe, obviously wanting to be picked up, so Harry set the phoenix on his shoulder and began climbing the hill. Within a few steps, he began to hear a familiar voice ahead. It was Ondossi; she was chanting in her Inupiat language just as she had in the forest the night before. He could barely see her in the overcast night, but he could tell she was dancing, much like she had in her memory of the seal hunt. Harry ascended to the graves without interrupting and sat by the headstones, setting Fawkes to perch upon the little marker that was meant for Harry himself. When Ondossi finally finished her chant, all remained silent for a few minutes until Harry spoke.

"Were you thanking them?"

"I was," Ondossi said quietly, sitting at the end of the flowerbeds.

"For what, exactly?"

She sighed. "For you. For dying so you could live. I had to make up a chant for it, there isn't one that I know of for that purpose. If my people need food so desperately that they have to kill a mother animal, they take the young as well. A baby alone in the Arctic wouldn't survive anyway."

"You did," noted Harry.

She had been gazing at the flowers over the graves, but her head snapped up at his comment. "Seems that way," she finally said, a bit gravelly. "Well, then," she began in a colder, more typical tone, "what are we doing here? As if I'm not spooky enough already, you summon me to skulk around in a cemetery?"

"Summon you? I didn't summon you!" said Harry indignantly.

"I was talking to the turkey, Harry." Fawkes puffed air noisily through his bill. "What gives, bird-brain? Couldn't you at least have waited until Halloween?" The phoenix made quite a show of turning his back to Ondossi, though he wobbled awkwardly as he swung his long tail around his low perch.

"I suppose it's my fault," said Harry. "Fawkes caught me doing something that nearly got me killed. I'd imagine he wants you to hear about it."

"That so? You know, Mr. Potter, you're really in the doghouse, because I have some current events to discuss as well. You see, about an hour ago, I woke up with such a start that I flipped right out of my own hammock, which is never pleasant. I had this absolute certainty that I had to get to a place called Godric's Hollow. I even knew how to Apparate there, which was very strange because I'd never Apparated before in my whole life. But I had a funny feeling it came from Feathers over there, so I went with it."

She stood up and came toward him, holding out her arm. "Imagine my surprise when I *landed* or *rematerialized* or whatever one does after getting sucked through that wormhole, and within seconds, there's an owl here with THIS." She was thrusting a piece of parchment under his nose. As soon as Harry took it, she lit her wand so he could read it. "I got a TICKET, for Apparating without a license! They fined me twenty Galleons! How am I supposed to pay that?"

Harry looked over the parchment and groaned again. "Tura, you nitwit, why didn't you get licensed? Kingsley Shacklebolt is an examiner, he licensed me right there in Headquarters!"

"Why didn't I get licensed?" she squalled. "I just told you, I don't Apparate! And even if I did, I didn't know you need a license! Geez, you guys need to get permission from Big Brother to do any magic at all! I may have to pin down that sanctimonious little yes-man Percy Weasley, and go through his stock of rules and regulations just so I can keep out of jail!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry. Maybe we can get the fine reduced if we explain that you weren't told about licenses."

"Oh, but that wasn't all," she said, the pitch of her voice rising from annoyed to near-hysteria. She flipped the wandlight from the parchment to her face, yanking back the hood of her cape. It took every ounce of Harry's self-control not to laugh, but he knew the consequence would be much worse than an onslaught of walnuts.

Ondossi was as bald as an egg.

"Where the Sam Hill is my HAIR?" she screeched so loudly that Harry feared the whole town would come running. He almost kept a straight face, but Fawkes started clucking with what could only be laughter and it was just too much. Harry laughed so hard that his stomach hurt and he had to lay on the ground.

"Oh, yeah," snarled Ondossi. "Hardy-har-har. I'm not a happy camper, you two."

Sitting up, Harry wiped his eyes. "Tura. It's called 'splinging.' Your hair's probably right where you left it."

"Joy. And can it be unsplined, or resplined, or whatever?"

"I think so. Sure, Ron splined his eyebrow once, and they put it back on. It'll be fine. Honest."

She noxed her wand and sat down abruptly. "I hope you're right," she said sullenly. "Now, *please* tell me I've gone bald for a good reason. Why am I here, Harry?"

Harry summarized the comedy of errors that made up his evening. When he finished, she nodded and asked what he'd learned.

"Well, besides how *not* to handle Fireflies, I gather it's not such a good idea to do Legilimency on non-humans."

"Well, actually, animals are fine--it's only magical creatures that will give you trouble. You can do it, I'm sure. The fact that you can find Hagrid so easily makes me think you're not as sensitive to nonhuman magic as I am. But obviously you're not immune to it. Geez, kiddo, didn't you figure it out when the elf knocked you out?" There was more than a hint of concern in her voice.

"I got that part, yes; it just didn't occur to me that the Flies might do the same thing."

"Hmph," grunted Ondossi, then fell silent for a moment. Harry had no guess as to the meaning behind the sound, and felt it best just to wait for her to elaborate. He grinned to himself in the darkness; he was getting better at managing this volatile creature.

She finally spoke up in a thoughtful tone. "You've worked hard, Harry. I guess it's only natural to explore your magic, now that you've learned so much Occlumency." Ondossi sighed. "Maybe it's time to start some Legilimency lessons, too."

"Yeah? Like that talking-inside-your-head that you do?" Harry asked, beaming.

"That, sure," she said with a wry chuckle. "That *is* pretty cool, huh? But that's nothing, really. There's so much more... so much power, Harry."

Harry was tempted to say, "Bring it on!" but held his tongue. It didn't matter; as soon as the thought was complete in his mind, Ondossi sniffed.

"There's that hotshot again," she said, surprisingly without contempt. "Can't wait to dive headlong into the abyss, can you?"

"Why not? I can't stop the train, so I might as well get on it, eh?"

Ondossi shrugged. "I suppose you've got a point. Can't exactly stuff the magic back in the can."

"Tura," Harry growled in exasperation, "you talk about your magic like it's a plague or something! All right, I know it gave you a rough start, but come on! You're one of the most powerful sorcerers alive!"

"Hah! Oh, yes, and look at all the influence and wealth that my magic brings me." She held up her hands to indicate the empty air.

It was Harry's turn to sniff in disdain. "Don't start with that. You could have fame or fortune any time you wanted."

"Oh, really, Harry?" she asked crossly. "And how would I do that? Sell my gift to the highest bidder? That would be the Dark Lord. He'd make me a queen, remember? Not too shabby."

He scoffed. "Now you're just being stubborn. You know very well you could pick and choose which offer to accept. There are decent wizards out there too, that could make good use of your magic."

"That may be even be true," she began, her voice quiet and free of sarcasm. "It's not so easy, though, Harry, finding the decent ones. Have you ever met anyone that pretended to be all noble or helpful, and all the while they were stabbing you in the back?"

Snape's face popped into Harry's mind immediately. "I have," he grunted.

"Spotting liars isn't as easy as it seems, Harry. People lie to me all the time, you know. Sometimes just for sport, to see if they can pull one over on the 'mind reader.' If it's not important, I let them get away with it--just so they'll overestimate themselves. If it matters, I skim their thoughts, but even then I can still miss a lie. Decent people can't help thinking about the truth or feeling guilty when they fib, but amoral types can just rattle off lie after lie without the slightest pause. The only way to be sure is to go in deep, which, as you know, is not my favorite thing."

"But you *could* do it, Tura. You could be as choosy as you wanted, and still earn a living. You don't *have* to worry about whether you can pay the fine on an Apparation ticket or buy food instead of hunting it!"

"Hey, I happen to like hunting! But I know what you're saying, Harry. The thing is, if I keep my magic under my hat, at least I know no one's abusing it. Think about it. What if whoever discovered the Dark Arts decided that wizardkind wasn't really capable of handling that power? Don't you think we could have done without that whole aspect of magic? Or how about the guy who figured out how to put house-elves under Wizards' control? I was skimming you while you told your tale tonight--I heard what you said, that the world might be better off without wizards. Well, I happen to think the world is better off without Legilimagi."

Harry tugged at the collar of his shirt. "And have all the Legilimagi been like you? Living on the fringes and eating rats, since they were the only ones wise enough to use their gift?"

Ondossi took a long time to answer. "No, not all," she finally said quietly. "There were a few exceptions. The most recent was named Grindelwald." Harry swallowed hard; he knew the name. "He had a title, too: the 'Reichzauberer.' Not regarded as a kindhearted guy. Albus Dumbledore put an end to him, if I remember the history books correctly."

"Point taken," said Harry somberly. "So I suppose I'm doomed to either replace Voldemort, just like you told me once, or hide away from the Wizard world for the rest of my life?" He braced himself for a scathing response from Ondossi, but to his surprise, she laid her hand delicately on his knee.

"No. Harry, listen. I'm the last person who should give advice about how to get along in the world!" She crossed her eyes and wrinkled up her nose in a ridiculous and disarming way until he smirked. "The fact is, I like living in my little shed and just being left alone--it suits me. But you seem to handle attention pretty well, much better than I do. Maybe for you, this magic really will be a gift, not a curse."

She squeezed his knee firmly and started to withdraw her hand, but Harry impulsively caught her wrist. "Tura," he blurted, "why do you touch me so much?"

Her brow furrowed. "What, now? Do I?" She scowled at her hand as if it was a separate entity, a look of rebuke such as one might give a playful puppy that was making a pest of itself. She jerked her hand roughly to her own lap. "I'm sorry! I'll stop, I'll make a point of stopping--"

"Don't," he said. Harry's voice came out much deeper than he'd intended, and he suddenly felt quite ill-at-ease, but he stretched his own hand in invitation. She glanced down at it, then back into his eyes, and rather timidly set her fingers onto his. "It's... it's okay. I just wondered..." he began. By that point, however, Harry wished he'd never broached the topic at all.

Ondossi turned away, staring off into the valley, but she kept her hand in his. "You're not much of a cuddler, are you, Harry? Our roles seem reversed--the misanthrope likes to hold hands and the gregarious Gryffindor withdraws. Funny." She paused thoughtfully. "The Inupiat snuggle all the time. From the day we're born. Babies never get set down--they ride around in the hood of mother's *atigi*. Her parka--her coat. Always being petted and held. Even me, an *igitaq* with no mommy! Other people carried me in their coats instead. It's always been the way--babies are meant to be cuddled. Outsiders say our babies are 'spoiled.' For a long time my people couldn't even translate that word. Finally someone worked out that it meant we pick up our babies and snuggle them as soon as they cry. That makes them *happy*. Why Outsiders think 'happy' means 'spoiled' is still a mystery to me, and I've lived in the minds of Outsiders for a long time."

Ondossi spread her fingers to entwine them with his. "I've seen your aunt and uncle in your thoughts, Harry. Now they're what I call spoiled! *Auniq*, in my language--sour and drippy, like a couple of nasty old cabbages. They never put you in the hoods of their coats, I can tell! They made you grow up without the affection that was your birthright, and now what's natural feels foreign to you. That just burns my toast, Harry. It's hard enough to get by in this world without having to feel isolated the whole time."

Harry scoffed, and though Ondossi scowled incomprehendingly, it took him a moment to find the right words. "I'm sorry," he said with a wry chuckle. "You have to admit, it's funny, though, don't you? For *you* to complain about *me* being isolated? That's a bit of 'Pot, meet Kettle,' don't you think?"

The moon had peeked from behind the clouds, and Harry was rather surprised to see the warmth in her smile. "Not at all, Harry. Let me show you something. We can even call it your first Legilimency lesson."

Ondossi held out her other hand and Harry took it, though his stomach immediately tightened with anxiety. "What are you going to do?" he asked, falling short of bravado.

"Nothing bad. I'm going to introduce you to someone."

Ondossi put her weight onto their hands such both she and Harry were pulled toward one another. Harry drew a rapid breath and instinctively tilted his head. But her head was bowed, and he quickly realized that she was not drawing him close, but placing their hands flat on the ground between them. As she chanted softly, Harry was surprised to hear the words "James" and "Lily" interspersed through her strange language.

Harry's first thought was that the ground beneath their hands was sinking, as though it were caving into an underground cavity. He nearly recoiled in horror, envisioning the soil spilling into his mother's coffin far below the surface, but Ondossi interrupted her chant long enough to bark, "Calm." It wasn't particularly soothing, but it was enough to make him snap to the realization that this was a magical process, not some sort of quicksand. Harry looked down at his hands, and found that they were buried up to his wrists into the earth.

Not buried, no. It was as if the ground were really water, and he was merely dipping his hands below the surface. There was no pressure, no sensation of being surrounded by cold, moist earth. The soil itself was undisturbed, which was perhaps the most eerie aspect of all--there was no buildup of displaced dirt around their arms, not even a ripple. They were sinking into the earth as smoothly as Peeves ducking out of sight through a stone wall.

"Tura..." Harry began awkwardly, not at all eager for his head to sink underground in this fashion, but before he could complete the sentence, her words formed in his mind.

*Open yourself, Harry. Let out your magic.*

He felt an unexpected warmth in his hands, but what she said made no sense. "Let it out? But where am I supposed to send it? There's nothing there!" Was she trying to get him to commune with the earthworms?

*Close, kiptaitchuq. The earth.*

"The earth," he repeated aloud. "Tura, you crazy spook, how am I supposed to--"

She silenced him with the briefest irritated glare, then the warmth in his hands surged up into his arms and chest, all the way to his mind.

The absolute blindness of not having eyes at all. Soundlessness that came from having no ears, no breath, no heartbeat. This was death, Harry thought, wondering after a few seconds why Fawkes had not saved him. That was the sort of thing he did, after all, and he was perched but a wingspan away.

*You're alive, silly. Focus.* Harry would have smirked if he still had a face. Fate would surely not be so cruel as to banish him to an eternity with no one but Ondossi for company. He expected to receive some sort of mental raspberry for that, but there was only a tiny tug at his hands.

Hands--he still could feel his hands, in fact only his hands and forearms. It took a moment for Harry to realize that he was feeling his hands from the *outside*--his and Ondossi's together. It occurred to him that this was the perspective of the Earth, two tiny pairs of hands softly penetrating an almost infinite darkness.

Ondossi's thought: *Yes, Harry.* But it made no sense; the Earth was a giant ball of rock spinning through space. It didn't have nerves to sense with, nor a brain to process that sensation. How could the Earth feel the two of them, it wasn't even alive!

*Try again. Open yourself, kiptaitchuq,* she repeated. For a moment, the connection faded and he was back in his body, peering through his own eyes at the ground now inches from his face. In an earnest effort, Harry gathered himself as if he were reaching for Remus or Hagrid and let his arms sink further into the earth.

The dark silence was even more intense and overwhelming, as though the first time he'd only penetrated the outer mantle of the planet and now he reached through to the core. It was incredibly peaceful, with a strange and distinct feeling that time had stopped. Knowing what to look for, however, Harry sought the delicate tickle of their hands at the edge of the darkness, and found them with surprising ease. This time, however, he realized that the Earth did not sense their mere physical presence of skin and bones digging into its surface, it felt their *magic*.

*Yes. Not alive, but still magical.* Harry didn't need Ondossi's prompting, for he understood it too. The magic at the core of his wand recognized him, and though it was once part of Fawkes, it was not alive, at least not in the sense that Fawkes was alive. Yet it wasn't just cold and empty either; strange, to think of the feather as both alive and dead at the same time. But in the same way, the entire Earth was both alive with magic and yet made of inert minerals--as though, like the feather, it was merely an offshoot of a greater being.

This was all getting to be a bit too heady for Harry, and he tried to pull free of Ondossi's grasp and sit up. *Wait. Follow me back to this hillside.* He could sense her magic shrinking, as though focusing through a lens. "Occlumency," he thought, and followed suit, finding that he, too, could resist expanding into the entire planet and, instead, remain present just in the land on which he sat. There were hands, his hands and Ondossi's, and a strange red needle that must be Fawkes, his magic deeply grounded by a single glowing filament.

There was something else, too. The warmth in his hands and arms--he'd assumed it came from Ondossi, but he could sense the color of her magic as well. The mossy green that emanated from her hands permeated the hillside along with his gold, but his arms themselves were encased in a faint sheen of red-orange magic, as though he were wearing the sheerest of gloves made from glowing coals. It seemed most curious, until he realized where he'd seen that color before.

It was just like the sphere of wild magic that had collapsed into Number Four, Privet Drive.

Harry was so startled by the recognition that he lost his focus, and found himself sitting bolt upright with a loud gasp. He saw Ondossi slide her hands from the soil as though it were mercury, and she took hold of his arms with a look of concern. "Why'd you pull away? That was a good thing, Harry--"

"I *know* what it was. I know EXACTLY what it was. Tura, that was my mother! My mother's magic!"

Relief and delight were evident in her smile. "Yes! That's right! Oh, Harry, I'm so glad you could see it! I thought it might be strong enough right here."

Harry was overwhelmed by the upheaval in his heart, by the number of questions he wanted to ask, and by the irrepressible desire to plunge his hands back into the earth and find that orange glow again. Frozen by conflict, all he seemed able to do was shake his head.

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry? You're surrounded by it, all the time, and you don't even know. You're a magnet, Harry, drawing it in like so many iron filings. It's probably your father's magic too, and Dumbledore's--anyone who cared about you. It's in every blade of grass, every pebble, every stream, all the time. It's strongest here, where their bodies lay, because this earth is made from them--ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that. This place resonates the most with their magic. But it travels throughout the whole Earth, Harry. You're never alone--every time you set foot upon the ground, they're with you." Even though the moon was hidden again behind the clouds, Harry could see the warmth in Ondossi's smile.

"And look who else is here!" she said, glancing over his shoulder. Harry furrowed his brows and turned around, and it quickly became clear: two specks of light were settling down on them from the atmosphere. The Fireflies had caught up to them at last.

Harry and Ondossi stood up to make way for the Flies. They spiraled down in a lazy helix, orbiting one another just as they had when they began this flight back at Hogwarts. "Those are nice," Tura said. "Man, if those lived in Northpole, they'd make the best Christmas lights. Everyone would want a set swirling over their chimney. Probably too cold, though." She sighed. "How long will they take to do their little thing, d'ya think?"

Something seemed odd but Harry couldn't quite place it. "Huh? Erm, I don't know... they took a couple of minutes to figure out I wasn't what they wanted. Not long. Then they needed some time to plan..." His words trailed off, as he watched them closely. They had come into a tight column and were buzzing rapidly over one of the graves.

His *mother's* grave.

Harry's stomach twisted itself into a knot. "What is this? Merlin's beard, what's going on?"

"What?" Even Fawkes made an inquisitive little hoot.

"They're looking for my dad, but they're flying over my mum's grave. This isn't right!" Harry was becoming more agitated by the minute. "That's got to be my dad down there! They've put them in the wrong graves, or switched the headstones, or something!" Even though Harry knew it didn't ultimately matter, he was outraged by the notion that his parents were not laid to rest properly.

Ondossi didn't seem too concerned. "Weird," she finally mumbled. "Well, don't get all discombobulated, now, this is easily fixed. We can just move the headstones, no harm done."

"Oh, no, we won't! Who's to say they only switched their coffins? Maybe that's not even them down there! Well, okay, it has to be my dad, obviously, but the other one might not even be Mum!" He was practically shouting and he didn't care--if the cemetery's keeper came out to investigate, Harry was ready to give him an earful.

"Harry! All right, all right. You're pretty upset, let's just fix it now." She pulled her wand out of her robe and flourished it a few times, as though warming it up. "You go down the hill a ways and I'll do some digging, okay? I don't want you to look, though. Promise you won't watch?"

The plunge from indignant fury to mortified dismay made a shiver travel down his spine. Harry was speechless for a moment, realizing this was the logical solution but dreading it nonetheless. "Uh, but the, uh, Fireflies?" he said feebly.

"I'll keep an eye on them. This won't take long. Go down the hill, Harry. You too, Red," she said, shooing Fawkes from the little marker with a gentle shove. The phoenix flapped up onto Harry's shoulder of his own accord and pressed his chin to the top of Harry's head, humming quietly.

Harry lumbered out of earshot, at least as far as the sounds of digging were concerned. He had no doubt that Ondossi could shout loudly enough to summon him if she needed to. "I can't believe it. This is just..." He wanted to vent his anger in words, even though Fawkes obviously didn't need to have anything explained. Of all the stupid mistakes... and now Ondossi had to disturb them to sort it all out. And even though his parents were long gone, even though no one else, least of all the two of them, knew about the mistake, it still *mattered*.

Between fuming and muttering to Fawkes, he didn't hear Ondossi come up behind him. Startled, Harry leapt to his feet when she tapped him on the shoulder, but, whirling around, he held back the exclamation that came to his lips. She was pale and shaking, and even her colorless eyes looked wider than usual. "Tura? What is it?"

"Harry... I need your help with this. I, I, we're getting into something very very wrong."

"What is it?" he repeated, his voice suddenly deep and stern.

"Okay, listen. In the grave marked with your mother's name, there were two bodies. Man and woman. I think it's pretty safe to assume it's both of them." Harry began to sputter in outrage, but Ondossi raised her hands for silence. "Not now, Harry. Just listen. She'd been laid out properly, hands folded and all that. He hadn't. He was... okay, this is terrible, but: he'd been kind of thrown in there, I think. Face down. These were, uh, under where his pocket would have been." She pulled a pair of glasses from her sleeve; the Fireflies were sitting on the frame. Harry took them gingerly in his hand as she continued.

"I thought... I didn't know what to think. Obviously he wasn't put in the other grave. So I thought, well, maybe the mortuary stole the payment for the coffin, you know, just buried them in one instead of two. I dug up the other site. Harry... there was a coffin in it. I'm afraid to open it by myself, Harry. I'm a hunter, for Pete's sake, but I'm scared to see what's in there, I don't even know why."

She looked it, too. Harry put his hands firmly on her shoulders. "You don't have to, Tura. I'll do it right now." He gave her arms a reassuring squeeze and started up the hillside.

"I'm coming too!" Ondossi squeaked, chasing right on his heels. "I'm a bit too creeped out to sit in the dark by myself right now."

A pile of earth sat beside his father's gravesite, with the coffin levitating over the pit where she had left it. She'd obviously restored the other grave already; but for a few bent leaves and stems, it looked just as it always did. "Tura, I know you're upset, but you keep stepping on my heels," Harry grumbled. "Back up a bit. And do you mind setting it down on the ground? It makes it even worse, having the thing floating in midair like that."

"Sorry, sorry," she said, waving her wand to land the coffin and inching away from his back slightly.

"How do you even open one of these things?" Harry asked.

"There's a little latchy thing on the lid--no, under the rim." He patted the cold, damp wood with his hand until he found a bit of metal. It gave way with a firm push, but the lid remained stubbornly in place when he tried to lift it.

"I think it's spelled shut too," he said, taking out his wand. "*Alohomora!*" There was a sharp clacking sound, and both expected the lid to rise open of its own accord, but it did not. Harry took hold of the lid and heaved much harder than was necessary, flinging it open so violently that the hinges groaned and rebounded promptly slamming it shut. He jumped back just in time to avoid getting his fingers crushed, but practically bounced off of Ondossi.

"I told you to back up!" Harry growled, more anxious than angry.

"You're the one playing Slam the Coffin!"

"Okay, okay. It's lighter than I expected. One more try." Harry lifted it gently, so distracted by the complications that he forgot his trepidation until he was actually looking into the box.

After all the excitement, it was a bit anticlimactic to discover an unremarkable skeleton inside, looking for all the world like a medical display, albeit a bit dirty. Harry sighed and raised his brows. "Well. After all that, I rather expected something a bit more spooky, didn't you?" His anger was returning, now that he'd "met" the stranger who'd displaced his father from his rightful spot. It took him a moment to notice that Ondossi did not answer him.

"Tura?" Harry said, glancing over his shoulder. She was staring into the coffin, her jaw slack, clutching her hands over her chest like a shield. He turned back just to make sure he hadn't missed something, but the skeleton was still resting quietly. "What's the matter? Do you know who it is?"

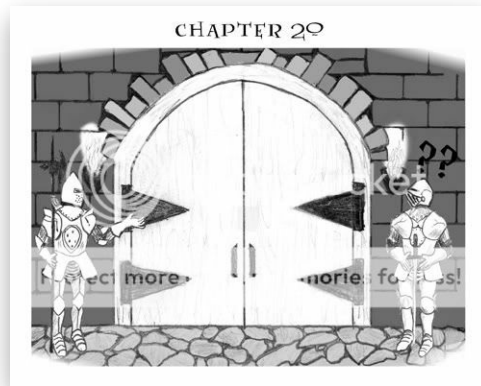
"His ring. His ring," she said in a breathless whisper, backing away as she spoke.

Harry looked down at the skeleton's hands. There was a ring looped over one finger, but it looked rather ordinary, a plain gold band with a modest gemstone. He frowned as he looked up at Ondossi again. "What?"

She pointed at the coffin. "Voldemort."

## 20: Overtime

Mad-Eye Moody reveals a softer side. Harry gets a chance to see some Aurors at work. Professor Trelawney makes a comment, as only she can. The search for the mirror finally ends.



"Voldemort? The body? What are you..." Harry's voice trailed off. He didn't understand how such a common-looking ring could give away the skeleton's identity, but it *would* explain why Voldemort's cadaver had never been found. Whoever dumped the body could hardly have found a more convenient hiding place.

Harry turned back for another look. He was no pathologist, but upon peering closely at the skull, his breath hitched in his chest. At the base of each canine tooth, there was a deep groove in the bone, revealing the roots--and a slender object nestled within them. It seemed to be another tooth, but it clearly didn't belong there.

Fascinated, Harry reached down and tapped experimentally at the proximal end of the foreign object with the tip of his wand. The thing slid easily down through the native tooth; it was, in fact, a fang, long and delicately curved like a snake's. Harry vividly recalled the way Ondossi's Animorphed fangs had retracted into her mouth the day before; clearly these were designed to work the same way, or at least to look like they did.

"Unbelievable. What a bloody lunatic," he said, sliding the fang back into its socket with his thumbnail.

"Are you nuts? Don't touch that!" Ondossi yanked on the back of Harry's sweater so violently that he nearly lost his footing.

"Tura, it's dead! It's not going to come jumping out at us! What's gotten into you?"

"Dead or not, it's bad juju! That IS the Dark Lord, Harry! The original! Don't desecrate him, for Pete's sake--you know how wicked he is! If anyone was spiteful enough to leave some sort of hex on his skeleton, it's him!"

That gave Harry pause. "Fine, fine," he acceded grudgingly, removing his hands from the coffin. "Well, we've got to do *something*. We can't just bury him again in my father's place." He pictured kindhearted Everett and Birdy trudging up the hill to lovingly tend to the garden over *Voldemort's* remains, and became incensed anew.

"No!" she agreed. "Definitely not. This is a job for those Aurors, Harry. They might even be able to figure out who put him there." For the first time, she looked away from the coffin and into his eyes. "Go to Headquarters. Now. Bring back anyone you can find. I'll stay here."

"Right, then." Harry made ready to Apparate, but paused. "Are you going to be all right here by yourself?" She'd been shaking with fear just seconds ago.

"I'm good. Feathers will stick with me... I hope. Will you?" She gazed at Fawkes imploringly, and he tilted his head at Harry for a brief instant, then flapped up onto her shoulder. Harry grinned; they looked cute together.

"You know, if he sat on your head, it would look like he was hatching--"

"Oh, go stuff yourself, you big *gussuk*," she snapped.

*She's obviously feeling better*, Harry mused. He gave Fawkes a stern glare and willed him to stay and keep her company, then Apparated to the sidewalk in front of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

It seemed this was the evening of Perpetual Hurry-Up-And-Wait for Harry. He couldn't even begin to plea for help until he'd endured a sound lecture from Lupin about departing from Hogwarts without notifying anyone. No sooner had Remus finished when Tonks came bounding down the stairs in her bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, and delivered a much louder and more concise version of the same speech. When Mrs. Black chimed in with her own unrelated opinions, Harry began to wonder if he shouldn't have gone to the Ministry of Magic instead.

His problems were still far from over, as no one quite accepted his story of finding the original remains of Voldemort in his father's coffin. It took Harry the better part of an hour to describe unlocking Hagrid's lost memories, which of course had to be debated and discussed before he could move everyone on to current events. By the time Shacklebolt and Moody gathered up their gear for a trip to Godric's Hollow, it was after midnight and Harry had dozed off in the drawing room, curled up in one of the refurbished chairs.

"Look at this, then," said Moody, tapping Harry's foot with his wand. "Just like an old campaigner, grabbin' a bit of sleep when and where he can." Harry sat up with a start and blinked at the old Auror, relieved to see that Moody was grinning as he spoke. "Turning more into a soldier every day, lad." He clapped Harry on the shoulder, but Harry glimpsed a hint of sorrow in the old man's eyes before Moody turned away and headed downstairs.

The three of them took the Floo to Godric's Hollow, as Kingsley had never been there and didn't want to waste any time studying maps to prepare for Apparation. Besides, the Green Dragon had reopened and Harry was glad to say a brief hello to Uther as they stepped out of the fireplace into the pub.

"Calliope will be sorry she missed you," Uther told him. "All she talks about now is how she learned a spell from Harry Potter."

Harry smiled broadly. "You'd best keep track of her, you two," he warned Shacklebolt and Moody. "She'll be Auror material someday."

Moody, who had watched Harry encounter the young lady in question through the magical pendant, nodded accordingly. "Aye, Kingsley, Potter's lucky she left him in one piece!"

The three of them proceeded quickly to the cemetery and once again found Ondossi dancing and chanting. Fawkes was sitting in the hood of her cloak with his wings spread open behind her. The two of them looked like some sort of strange angel. Harry held out his hand to keep the Aurors from interrupting the ritual, but there was no need. Moody's magical eye became uncharacteristically still and focused as it watched the dance.

"You know," Moody said quietly, "sometimes she makes me wish I was a young man again." He regarded the two of them with his human eye, the magical one remaining

fixed on Ondossi as he turned his head. Harry moistened his lips and glanced up at Moody; unbeknownst to him, Shacklebolt had done the same thing.

"Course, then I remember what she is," Moody continued gruffly. "That she could kill me with an errant thought. Then I start thinking about my ex-wife, whether I'd be around at all if *she* had that kind of power. I think not."

"You were married?" muttered Shacklebolt incredulously, just before Harry could blurt out the same question.

"Three times," Moody grunted. That broke their concentration, as both of them frowned and tried to figure out how that worked with the "ex-*wife*" (singular) comment. Moody smirked. "Same gal. Metamorph, like Tonks. I didn't even catch on until I got this." He tapped the magical eyeball, making a small click. "Just in time to stop Marriage Number Four. Never knew what she saw in me, but she sure kept coming back for more. Crazier than a trunk full of bats, though. Shame." Moody turned back to watch Ondossi, leaving Harry and Shacklebolt to gape at one another.

Ondossi finally snapped to a halt, panting, with her back to the three men, and Fawkes closed his wings. Moody stepped forward. "I always heard that witches danced naked amongst the tombstones," he called out.

Ondossi spun on her heel with a snort, still catching her breath. "Not in Alaska, they don't!" she said jovially. "Of course, if you're offering, Moody, be my guest!" She gestured with a sweeping flourish, as though inviting him to take the stage.

Moody laughed unexpectedly. "No one wants to see that, missy, believe it. Let's have a look at this mystery cadaver, then."

"No mystery," she growled. "It's the Dark Lord. The mystery is, how'd he get into James Potter's grave?" She stopped speaking and scanned all around the cemetery, even the sky, as though expecting Voldemort's wrath to start raining down on them at any moment. She shuddered and stomped down the hillside without another word.

The Aurors exchanged a bemused glance and began removing strange devices from their packs that reminded Harry of the silver instruments that had always littered Dumbledore's office. Though he was dearly inclined to stay and watch the Aurors at work, Harry had to speak to Ondossi. The Fireflies were nowhere to be seen, and he hoped desperately that she'd kept track of them somehow. He dashed down the hill and caught up with her.

"Tura, the Flies... tell me you know where they are?" he pleaded.

She slowed her pace and looked at him with a sheepish grimace. "Well, no, not exactly. They started winding up in that little column thing they do, just after you left. I tried to read them, Harry; that is, I *did* read them, even though it knocked me flat on my back for twenty minutes. They have very strange little minds. The world looks really beautiful through their eyes, though--they can see almost everything at once."

"So what did you learn?"

Ondossi frowned. "You disappear for two hours and now it's rush, rush, rush! Fine. It was the weirdest thing I've ever done as a Legilimagus. In the end they sort of zeroed in on a place I've never seen before. It's almost as though they could smell it, their next destination, except it wasn't smell either, it was almost... electrical. They take in the sensation from every direction as they spiral like that, and when they triangulate on the strongest 'scent,' they just sort of *know* where they're going."

Harry bit his lip as she spoke, and stared at her long after she stopped. "Well?" he finally demanded.

"Well what?"

"Well, where did they go?"

"How should I know? I told you, I've never seen it before! It wasn't Grimmauld Place, or Hogwarts, or the Ministry, but other than that... wait a second." Ondossi closed her eyes, frowning. "I haven't seen it before, but someone has."

Harry folded his arms in an effort not to strangle her.

"Someone... someone I read recently," she continued. "It must have been Hagrid. Hagrid's seen it before. Let me think; I wasn't really paying attention because I was trying to dissect out the alterations in his memory." Her brow furrowed deeply in concentration. "He was there, at night... and someone yelled out their window for him to be quiet. That's right, they used a bad word; that's the only reason I noticed it. Bad words always sound funny with a foreign accent."

Harry knew every part of Hagrid's memory from the night his parents died. A neighbor had berated Hagrid for banging so loudly on Sirius's door. "The house in Bristol, then."

Ondossi shrugged. "It was a house, at least. They went that-a-way," she said, pointing northeast. "Is that toward Bristol?"

Harry nodded, deep in thought. "They found my dad, and now they're looking for Sirius," he muttered quietly. "Both Sirius and my dad made the mirrors." Harry sighed audibly in relief--it was certainly about time things started going smoothly. He looked from side to side absently, trying to recall where he'd left his Firebolt.

"Sirius... as in Sirius Black?" asked Ondossi. "Your godfather? The grouch who yelled at me in the Floo?" When Harry nodded, she sniffed. "Why are you looking for him? He's dead, isn't he?"

Harry clenched his teeth and glared at her, then started up the hill.

"Tell me you're not going to follow them again," said Ondossi. Harry didn't answer, scanning for his broomstick, certain that he'd left it leaning against some nearby headstone. "Dare I point out they've had a huge lead, on top of being incredibly fast?"

Harry waved at her brusquely. "They go faster when the scent is strong. Sirius hasn't been in Bristol for sixteen years; they're following just a trace. They might not even be there yet." Harry came to an abrupt halt, squaring his shoulders in surprise at his own words. "How did I know that?" Cocking his head, he felt an uneasy sensation, as though someone had just tried to hex him. Then he recalled it, like an old dream: Hagrid had been aware of this as he followed the Fireflies the first time, though he had never once enunciated it. "Hagrid knew it... and now I know it." Harry gaped at Ondossi, stunned to realize that he had absorbed this bit of knowledge straight from Hagrid's mind, bypassing the usual process of learning.

Ondossi snickered, then spread her arms wide and made a slight bow. "Welcome to my world, hotshot."

Harry wished he could discuss this new development, but he was determined to give the Flies another go. He nodded at Ondossi and turned resolutely up the hill. He soon spotted his broom leaning against a headstone, silhouetted against the faint blue glow produced by the Aurors' instruments. *If they find out I'm leaving, they're not going to like it*, he mused, and crept up silently to retrieve the Firebolt. His plan was undone, however, when he turned around and smacked noisily into Ondossi.

"Sneakin' off on us, Potter?" called Moody, though his back was turned.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Harry said, giving her the evil eye.

He stomped down the hill with Ondossi trotting at his side, intending to give her a stinging admonishment when they were out of earshot of the Aurors. But she spoke up first. "Well, what was I supposed to do? You're my only way back to Hogwarts!"

Harry stopped and faced her. "What are you talking about? The Aurors could take you back--they can Apparate you to the front gate. Maybe they'd even put your hair back



on if you asked nicely!"

"All things considered, I'd rather fly--and you know for me, that's saying something. Besides, didn't you just get chewed out for swooping off alone tonight?"

Harry opened his mouth, then pressed his lips together tightly. "I wasn't alone, really--Fawkes was with me."

"Only after you nearly pulled your own plug! Harry, face it. By the time you get to Bristol, those Flies will be long gone. Even in low gear, they're fast--and they've got nearly two hours head start. You've got to start fresh, maybe with a thestral next time. You discovered something more important here anyway. Let's go see how those Aurors are doing and bid your parents a proper goodbye." She gave him an imploring look.

"All right," Harry finally said. "I suppose it *is* more important to finish this." He sighed and glanced back up the hill, then added, "But just on principle, Tura, can you *please* stop following right on my heels?"

"Sorry. I just didn't want you to hop on that thing and disappear without me. I don't know Kingsley very well, but that Moody gives me the willies."

Harry cracked a wry grin. "I'm pretty sure it's mutual."

Ondossi punched his arm halfheartedly and they returned to the open grave. The Aurors were making meticulous adjustments on the magical contraptions they'd laid out, speaking in jargon that intrigued Harry.

"I've got twenty-three on the S.T. Can you boost the gain?"

"Nah, site's too open. The MACs'll come undone if we get much more visible."

"I'll make do. Anything from the Thanadust?"

"Got to add a bit more horn, I think."

By surreptitiously skimming the Auror's thoughts as they spoke, Harry was able to follow the conversation. "S.T." was short for "signature tracer," and referred to a series of small, spinning objects that looked like dreidles. They were set about on the handles of the coffin, the latch, and several points on the skeleton inside. They were used like a Muggle fingerprint kit, identifying unique magical energy left behind by wands. Shacklebolt was operating this instrument, hoping to find evidence left from any levitating or locking spells that had been used on the coffin or the body.

Shacklebolt was grumbling irritably to himself because Ondossi's recent magic had flooded the area with her own wand signature. He was unable to increase the device's sensitivity because of their position on an open hillside in Muggle territory. The soft blue glow could pass as a wisp of fog in the moonlight, but any more power would make it clearly visible--hence Moody's warning about the "MACs." This referred to the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, whom Moody suspected were already spying on this operation, waiting for a chance to shut them down in the name of discretion amongst Muggles.

Moody himself was waving his wand over a pentagram drawn with a chalky powder known as Thanadust. It contained ground asphodel seed and unicorn horn. Asphodel was generally associated with death and the underworld, while unicorns were creatures of vitality. Having opposite polarities, these compounds tended to react violently to one another and release their magic into their surroundings. Moody's spell was designed to use this flux of energy to create images of the last living sorcerers to touch the deceased. Harry grimaced as he saw his own face appear over and over in the center of Moody's pentagram. He wished he'd never noticed that stupid tooth.

Moody stood up straight and held out a leather sack, waving his wand over the chalk outline. It slithered neatly into a powdery column and deposited itself into the sack. "You two rubes need a crash course in basic Auror training," he growled, as he took a small scoop of powder from a second pouch and sprinkled it slowly into the first. "When you come across a crime scene, don't bloody alter it! Anything might be a clue."

"Fiddle-faddle!" snapped Ondossi. "We didn't know it was a crime scene until *after* we dug the thing up! We thought it was just a Stupidity Scene--although you people probably consider stupidity a crime, too; you seem to think everything else is." Harry regarded her with surprise; she sounded downright petty. Upon closer look, however, he realized she was blushing, undoubtedly embarrassed that she'd butchered so much latent evidence with her magic.

"An' you prefer anarchy, do you, missy? Like in the Wild West?"

Ondossi bristled. "I prefer a little room to breathe."

"Mmm," grunted Moody. "I suppose when you live in the wide open tundra, you take breathing room for granted." He finally appeared satisfied with the powder and pulled the drawstrings shut to give the pouch a good shake. "Some of us live in a civilized country, and have to compromise to get along." He looked over at them for the first time.

"No one *has* to live anywhere. You choose to do it," Ondossi said in a calm, quiet voice. "I wish I didn't have to even *visit* this place, but they tell me they need me."

Moody and Ondossi held each other's gaze for a long time, although it seemed not so much of a staring match as an honest appraisal. The old man finally nodded and got back to his work, sprinkling the Thanadust back onto the ground in another pentagram.

"What was that all about?" Harry whispered.

"Nothing," she whispered back. "Two rogue wolves testing the air between them."

"And? Is there enough for both of you to breathe?" Harry asked pointedly.

She made a wry face. "Listen to you! You're supposed to be an assassin, not a diplomat! Don't you worry about me and Mad-Eye, we're both just a little too jaded for our own good. But I kinda like him, after all. He reminds me of my *afatkuq*, back in Barrow. My shaman," she added helpfully, though Harry remembered the Inupiaq word.

"His heart's in the right place," said Harry. "Though Merlin-only-knows about his other parts." Ondossi's hands flew over her face to hide her snort of laughter.

The Aurors continued to work their craft over the coffin for at least an hour. Harry watched with interest, but soon he couldn't keep from yawning, despite his curiosity. Unfortunately, the best that Shacklebolt could prove was that the coffin had never been lowered into the ground by magic. "Most likely, the bodies were switched before the funeral," he deduced. "The Muggles buried the coffin without even knowing that the wrong body was inside it."

Harry sighed, shaking his head. Shacklebolt put a firm hand upon his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Potter. I really am. There's no more we can get out of this scene, not even back at the Ministry. It's just been too long." He paused, pressing his lips tight, then continued in an even milder tone. "We'll bring in You-Know-Who's remains, but there's still the coffin. It was supposed to be your father's... I don't suppose you want us to put him in there, under the circumstances?"

The question was enough to make Harry's insides clench. "No. Just... just bury it again, empty. Fix everything up just as it was and let Birdy keep coming over and planting her flowers. She believes he's down there--that's all that matters."

Shacklebolt patted Harry's shoulder and turned away to take down his instruments. Harry let out a deep sigh and dropped his chin to his chest. His neck was sore and taut, and he rocked his head from side to side in an effort to loosen the muscles.

"I didn't know them, obviously," said Ondossi, "but I think they wouldn't mind being buried together like that. You know?" She nudged him lightly on the elbow. Harry didn't answer.

When the Aurors had packed everything up and the gravesite had been restored to its usual appearance, Shackbolt bade them farewell and Apparated to the Ministry with their gear. He would send a squad back to get Voldemort, as soon as he could get one assembled. Moody scowled at the skeleton for a moment, then leaned over and yanked out the fang that Harry had touched.

"Might as well have a souvenir, Potter," he said. For a moment, Harry thought this was Moody's way of chastising him again for touching the body, but the old Auror appeared quite sincere. "Go on. Keep it. Not that you need another reminder," Moody added. "But you know it'll get picked over, soon as it gets to the Ministry. Trophies."

Ondossi knelt beside the skeleton, her gaze unfocused as though she were entranced. "It's true. People are drawn to him. That's why he's so powerful--he makes you *want* to serve him, even if you know it's a terrible mistake." She drew the other slender fang out of its artificial socket and studied it for a moment before palming it. "We'll keep the matched set, Harry. Know why?" She rose to her feet, the sharpness returning to her eyes. "'Cuz we're gonna come 'round and bite him in the butt."

A feral grin spread to all three of their faces.

In a rare display of anarchist tendencies, Moody made up an illegal Portkey for Harry, Ondossi, and Fawkes to use to return to Hogwarts. They arrived just outside the gates, only to find them locked. "Oh, for the love of Pete," Ondossi groaned. They looked at one another glumly--both knew that a simple *Alohomora* stood no chance of opening *this* gate.

"Well, it can't be too much longer 'til dawn..." Harry began, but he was interrupted by flapping wings and a gust of air. Fawkes launched himself from Harry's shoulder and fluttered gracefully to the top of the gates, where he perched on one of the winged boars and peered down at them brightly. Harry grinned at Ondossi and held up his Firebolt. "Care for a lift, miss?"

"I never thought I'd be glad to get on one of these," she said, though she nearly squeezed the stuffing out of him when he pushed off the ground.

Harry wondered if Fawkes somehow raised the wards over the gate to let them enter the grounds, or if the wards themselves had recognized them and permitted passage. He glided all the way to the castle entrance, too tired to bother walking up the path. Besides, once Ondossi relaxed her death grip, Harry rather liked the way she felt pressed up behind him.

"Well, I'm starving," she said as they landed at the top of the stone stairs. "I'm gonna go catch something. See you in class." She gave his sides two quick pats as she let him go and hopped off the back of the Firebolt.

"You don't have to do that, you know. I told you yesterday, the house-elves will feed us. Unless you're feeling peckish for a bit of field mouse."

Ondossi wrinkled her nose. "Point taken. People food sounds better."

The oak front doors opened without pause, and though Harry expected to find a fuming Filch just beyond them, the Entrance Hall was empty. He turned back to Ondossi and raised a finger to his lips for silence, and they stole across the Hall on tiptoe, not even rousing the portraits on the walls. They both broke into silent giggles at the top of the dungeon stairs, but their exhausted giddiness was shattered by a harsh voice bellowing from directly above them.

*"FROM ASHES AND MUD SHE SHALL RISE, TO RENDER AT LONG LAST THE BOON THAT IS HIS DUE. HEED THIS, CHOSEN ONE: IT IS RIGHT AND JUST, THOUGH SHE BE LOATHE TO GIVE IT. YOU MUST ANSWER WITH YOUR OWN BLOOD."*

As the echoes died, there was a sound of scraping metal; the suits of armor at the doors turned their heads toward one another in a pantomime of complete bafflement. Ondossi was staring upwards with a similar expression. "What the Sam Hill was *that*?" she said.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry groaned. "I'd know that voice anywhere. She must be at the top of the stairs."

She scowled. "And people call *me* spooky!"

Harry shrugged. "She has these prophetic moments once in a while, but when they're over, she's done. Probably standing there wondering what she's doing out of her tower. Come on." He tugged her arm and scampered down the staircase, knowing that Filch would appear momentarily to investigate all that ruckus.

It seemed like a week had passed since Harry had last stood before the portrait hole to the kitchens. He wondered briefly if he would be refused entry after the fire he started in the storeroom, but when he tickled the pear, it dutifully became a handle and allowed them inside. Harry smirked at himself for worrying--Fred and George had never been denied access to the kitchens, and surely they had done far worse.

They were greeted with the wonderful smell of baking bread and the sight of rows of bowls being filled with berries and cream by a pair of elves wearing identical window draperies (right down to the silver napkin rings that gathered the fabric at their shoulders like a toga). A small delegation ran over to greet them with a platter of fresh muffins, still steamy inside. Harry and Ondossi were shuffled to a sideboard by a friendly elf who told them that they could have all they wanted to eat, as long as they stayed out of the way of the breakfast rush. "Eggs is getting cold quickly, whilst bacon and toast burns if you turns your back, so we is very focused at breakfast time. But no one is wanting to be rude, just rushing!"

Harry and Ondossi sat crosslegged on the wooden countertop with the muffins and two huge steins of milk, mesmerized by the coordinated chaos of fifty elves preparing hundreds of breakfasts. After four muffins, Harry's eyelids began to droop and the long climb to his dormitory seemed like far too much effort. He had just leaned his head against the wall to rest his eyes when Ondossi whacked the side of his leg with the back of her hand.

"Harry, *look!*"

He gawked at her, then followed her gaze to the burners and grates of the main cooking range. It was still too early to start the food, but a few flames were lit beneath giant copper tea kettles. Harry didn't notice anything out of the ordinary and frowned at Ondossi, but she continued to point toward the cooktop. "Above it, in the funnel," she whispered.

Harry looked up at the large round exhaust vent over the range, still unsure what she was on about, then he spotted it: What he had taken for reflections of the cooking flames were, in fact, two Fireflies, slowly spiraling down through the flue. His jaw dropped, and both of them scooted off the sideboard to their feet, their eyes never leaving the flickering Flies. Once they had cleared the conical hood, the Flies stopped spiraling and flew side-by-side at a casual pace across the kitchen, soaring down the hallway a scant meter from where Harry and Ondossi were standing.

Too dumbfounded for words, the two of them followed as the Flies wove their way down the branching hall, then dipped down a very narrow staircase. This ended in what was once a wine cellar but had obviously fallen into disuse, as it was now littered with empty, broken racks and barrels, and spent corks. The Flies honed onto a large barrel with several missing slats and ducked inside it.

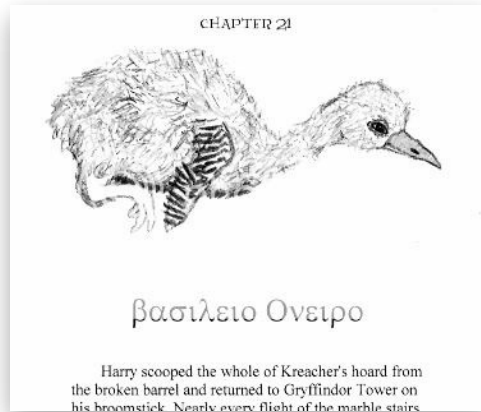
Harry stubbed his toe immediately as he tried to navigate the dark, unkempt room, but Ondossi was clearly in her element and moved silently through the rubble, pulling Harry by the hand to the faintly-glowing barrel. She glanced up at him with a buoyant grin and tossed her head toward the opening, bouncing excitedly on her toes as she waited for him to look inside.

He poked his head between the missing slats and beheld, in the Fireflies' contented glow, a heap of familiar items from Grimmauld Place, including a small hand mirror identical to the one he'd left hidden in Dobby's cupboard.

## 21: Basileio Oneiro

Chapter 21 of 50

At last, Harry's found the mirror that could link him to Sirius. Now he's got to do some experimenting.



Harry scooped the whole of Kreacher's hoard from the broken barrel and returned to Gryffindor Tower on his broomstick. Nearly every flight of the marble stairs swung at him during his ascent, obviously perturbed about being bypassed and determined to teach him a bit of respect. Harry had to perform some slick maneuvers to avoid being turned into a human pinball, but it had been much too long and tiring a night to climb all the way up from the dungeons. He even called out the password to the Fat Lady from the beginning of the corridor so he could fly straight into the common room, but he pulled up to a halt before the stairs to his dormitory. Attempting the narrow spiral staircase on his broom would require some intense concentration, particularly if anyone happened to be walking *down* at the time.

He didn't encounter any early risers, and burst into his room rather noisily but without effect; his roommates had apparently become inured to sudden sounds in the night. He almost shook Ron awake anyway, but decided to let him rest. They were going to have a busy day, and *one* of them should be operating at full steam. He fumbled around in the murky twilight to find his quill and a scrap of parchment, leaving Ron a quick note before collapsing in his four-poster. Though his heart was pounding, his eyes felt dry and sharp, and before long, mind prevailed over matter and his snores joined the other four.

It didn't seem to do much good, however; when Ron jostled him awake, it felt as though he had just closed his eyes. "Harry, it's nine o'clock, get up!"

He groaned a little, but sat up. "Ugh. I thought I said to wake me up at eight!"

"Tried, mate," said Ron with a shrug. "You just rolled over and snarled at me. 'Never tickle a sleeping dragon,' you know. I thought I'd try again after breakfast. I saved you a bit." He pointed to a rather familiar-looking muffin perched on his trunk. Harry shook the cobwebs from his mind, unable to remember rolling or snarling. "Huh. Okay. I guess I was pretty wiped out."

"Still are, I reckon! When did you get in?"

"Just before dawn. You won't *believe* the night I had!" Harry scooted over to make room for Ron on his bed, then recounted the whole story. "After all that, the mirror was just around the corner the whole time!"

Ron shook his head, laughing bitterly. "I figured as much; that's the sad part. Those Flies aren't very efficient. Not like the stuff those Aurors were using! Merlin's beard, Harry, that must have been brilliant, seeing all that!"

"It was, mate. But you'll get there--one more year and it's Auror training, right?"

Ron laughed in agreement. "No more Wizard Wheezes! Well, come on then--we've missed Potions, but we can still make it to Charms."

Harry threw off the covers and began pulling off his jeans and sweater from the night before. "Not today. I'm skiving. Now that I have this mirror, I'm going to London. You coming?"

It took Ron a heartbeat or two to reply. "Of course. But... do you have a plan?"

Harry scoffed. "No. But at least I have an excuse! Tura got a citation last night--Apparating without a license. I'm going to pay her fine. That'll get us inside the Ministry."

Ron's eyes narrowed into a sly grin. "And if the lift just happens to stop at the wrong floor, and we end up in the Department of Mysteries..."

"Exactly."

Harry quickly found that he was down to one set of robes after last night's fire. He had outgrown them, which was why they were in the bottom of his trunk in the first place. Ron burst out laughing when he saw Harry stand up. "Where's the flood?" he asked glibly.

Harry sighed. "Are they really that bad?"

Ron tried to look calm and detached, but failed miserably. "Well, kinda. Yeah. I mean, the sleeves don't even come down to your wrists! It looks like someone did a Shrinking Spell while you were getting dressed!"

"Fine," Harry grumbled, pulling off the uncomfortable robe. "I'll wear the nice ones from Fred and George. I guess I have to go to Madame Malkin's while we're down there."

"Not to mention we have to pick up a new bed for Dobby," Ron reminded him.

As they were crossing the common room, the portrait hole swung open to admit a large group of students who were between classes. Harry and Ron grimaced at the same

time and glanced back at the dormitory stairs, but it was too late. A chorus of whoops and whistles ensued as people noticed Harry dressed to the nines, and to make matters worse, Hermione poked her head through the portrait hole in curiosity at the noise. She snickered and dashed over to them, tossing her backpack onto a table. "Don't you look sharp today, Mr. Out-All-Night?" she teased.

"Did you hear something, Ron?" Harry asked innocently.

"I waited up for you until midnight, you know!" chided Hermione. "I was worried! If Fawkes hadn't been with you, I would have Flooded Headquarters."

"And I probably would have answered!" Harry said rather smugly. "I was there around midnight, I think."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You were? What were you up to, Harry? Ron must have taken a Silencing Sweet or something, I haven't been able to get a word out of him!"

Harry glanced at Ron to convey his thanks, and Ron shrugged as if to say, "I tried." But the cat was out of the bag now, so he took Hermione by the elbow and steered her to a quiet corner for a quick explanation.

"You were going to cut classes and go to London--" she began as soon as he finished the tale, but Harry spoke over her.

"We ARE cutting classes and going to London. You're not going to stop us, Hermione."

She gave him a withering glare. "You didn't let me finish. I was going to say, without *me*?" She sat back in her chair, arms folded and chin pointed.

"Oh," mumbled Harry. "I didn't... that is, we didn't think you'd approve--"

"Harry, the trouble is that you don't think at all. It's true I didn't approve of gadding off in the middle of the night to break into the Ministry, but this is a whole new scenario. And a much better one, I might add," she noted briskly. "Besides, I'd love to go shopping in Diagon Alley. Let's get to class and we'll start out after lunch."

Harry and Ron gaped at each other, then at Hermione. "After lunch? We were going to leave now!"

"Oh, it's much too early!" she said matter-of-factly, removing one book from her backpack and replacing it with another. "We'd be stuck sitting around for hours, waiting for the Ministry to close." Taking in their confused glances, she continued. "So we can have the Department of Mysteries all to ourselves. Right? You *were* planning on hiding inside the Ministry until closing time, weren't you?"

Harry and Ron exchanged a guilty look. "Honestly!" sniffed Hermione. She muttered about their bad habits all the way to the Charms classroom.

After lunch, the three of them convened at the statue of the one-eyed witch in the third floor corridor. Carefully watching the hallway and the Marauder's Map, they slipped one by one into the secret passage behind the statue and slid down the ramp to land in a giggling heap at the bottom. Harry felt as though he knew every twist and turn of the passage by heart, and he dashed unerringly through it without even lighting his wand. He remembered how long the tunnel had seemed that first time he went through it his third year; now it felt like Hogsmeade was but a hop, skip, and jump away.

As they neared the top of the long stone stair to Honeydukes, Ron called for a halt. "You know, if we're going to be stealthy about it, we should just Apparate from here, rather than going up into the cellar. Less chance of running into someone, eh?"

"To Diagon Alley, then?" said Hermione.

"Last one to the Leaky Cauldron buys the butterbeer!"

Harry arrived first, grinning broadly about the race, but his cheer quickly abated as he realized a number of the other patrons were staring at him. As Hermione, then Ron Disapparated, more heads turned, all glaring, and soon all three of them began to wonder if they'd landed on someone important. Ron even turned around to see if something unpleasant was going on behind them.

They were soon rescued by Tom, the proprietor, who came over and steered them to the main parlor. "You know this place connects the Muggle and Wizard worlds, don't you?" Tom said quietly as he walked with them. "Muggle London, right on the other side of the front door. A door that opens wide *and* often, during the course of a day. Can't have people Apparating in here like that, can we? The Magic Reversal Department would have my head on a platter, they would, if a bus full of Muggles saw a crowd of kids appear out of thin air."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione each felt a sharp pang of embarrassment, but Tom's stern demeanor brightened. "No harm done this time, lads, lady--" he inclined his head courteously at Hermione, "--but you've got to use the cloakroom if you want to Apparate in here. Not the pub, neither; the noise startles everyone and it's rude. Now, each of you take out one Sickle an' put it in that big glass bowl on the bar. That's your fine, for the insult." All three of them dug obediently into their pockets and produced a silver coin. Harry noted with relief that the bowl was over half full.

By the time the third coin had clunked into the bowl, the chatter in the parlor had resumed and the few patrons that were still eyeing them looked curious rather than irritated. "Everyone in here knows there are times you just have to Apparate," chuckled Tom. "You pay up right away and no one will think anything of it. That's because when the bowl finally overflows, I use it to buy a free round for the whole house."

"Which reminds me, Mr. Weasley, I believe the first round of butterbeer is on you," said Hermione.

After a bottle or two, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off to make their purchases. Hermione wanted to go to Magical Menagerie, the pet store, to buy a toy for Crookshanks. That stop proved more quite useful, as Harry found a bed for Dobby. Though intended for dogs, crups, and other such pets, it was the perfect size for a house-elf, and included a nice self-cleaning cover. "Perfect!" remarked Ron, "Dobby will be all set the next time we visit."

Harry was fitted for new robes at Madam Malkin's and found a nice reading lamp at the Scribbulus ink-and-stationery store. He and Ron picked up Owl Treats at Eeylops, and all three browsed in Flourish and Blotts for quite some time before Harry chose a nice set of "Wee Wizard" books for early readers. Despite all these errands, they had time for an early dinner at a cafe' before heading over to the Ministry. Harry had no appetite, but ate anyway--the last thing they needed was to be caught lurking after closing time because his stomach was growling.

At one point between reluctant bites, Harry mentioned Professor Trelawney's unexpected prediction on the stairs that morning. Ron and Hermione were pretty skeptical. "No, no," Harry assured them, "this was one of her real ones. I could tell because, even though she directed it specifically at me, she didn't say a single thing about me dying a horrible death in the near future."

Ron looked impressed, but Hermione snorted in disdain. "She mentioned answering with your own blood, though; that's practically the same thing."

"Nah," said Ron. "That's too direct. You know how she is--if she was 'predicting' him to be hurt, she'd say it like, 'There is a bitter wound on the horizon of your...' uh, your..." Ron had imitated Trelawney pretty well for a moment, but obviously got befuddled in the wrap-up.

Harry helped him out in his own Trelawney voice. "The horizon of time," he suggested with a dramatic sweep of his arm.

"Yeah! Perfect!" said Ron. "That way the next time you fall down and scrape your kneecap, she can strut around looking smug, even if it takes twenty years." He and Harry exchanged a sneer and a high-five. Even Hermione capitulated to a brief giggle.

Harry was unable to sustain the lighthearted mood, and poked listlessly at his salad. "Seriously, though, this one was real. She used her Scary Voice, the one she gets when she means it. I'm surprised she didn't roust out half the castle."

Hermione nodded. "People definitely heard it; there was a lot of gossip between classes. Some thought it was Peeves, and others were sure it was the Grey Lady of Ravenclaw. It seemed too serious for Peeves, but the Grey Lady hardly ever speaks. Well, this certainly explains a lot; no student has ever heard Trelawney deliver a real Prophecy, so naturally no one recognized it for what it was."

"From ashes and mud *she* will rise," mused Ron. "Who do you suppose that is?"

"Sounds like a phoenix sort of thing to me," said Hermione matter-of-factly as she dug into her mashed potatoes.

"But Fawkes is a boy... I think," said Harry. "I've always assumed so, anyway. Maybe he's a she?"

Ron waved. "It doesn't mean Fawkes, I'm sure. I mean, even *I* could predict that Fawkes will rise from the ashes. Surely she wouldn't waste a *real* prophecy on that? I wonder, though, maybe 'she' means a new phoenix--a girlfriend for Fawkes? How are new phoenixes born, anyway?" All three of them frowned at their dinner plates; neither had ever thought about it.

"I suppose in the usual way, you know," said Harry tentatively. "Boy phoenix meets girl phoenix, they build a nest, lay an egg, it hatches, and poof: a new little fireball in the family."

Hermione pondered a moment. "No, you know what? I don't think it's that simple. Since they never die, it must be very, very hard for them to reproduce. Otherwise they wouldn't be so scarce."

"S'truth," said Ron sagely. "Imagine if rabbits never died. The whole planet would be waist-deep in them."

"Exactly!" said Hermione. "Maybe the birth of a new phoenix has a major significance--the sort of thing that only happens, say, when a Dark Lord is overthrown..." She looked at Harry with a shy grin, as if apologizing for bringing up the subject.

"Well, it isn't as though Trelawney said anything about a birth, or a hatching, or whatever. Just that 'she' would give 'him' a boon, whoever 'he' is. Drat these stupid things anyway!" Harry grouched. "If her Inner Eye (or whatever) is so eager to tell us, why can't it just speak plainly?"

Hermione sniffed. "Well, there it is. Maybe the Inner Eye is just as big a fraud as Trelawney herself, it's just a slightly more accurate fraud. Its predictions really can come true, if you work them hard enough, while hers are just so much hot air, no matter what."

"The one about me was made months before I was born. And more than a year passed before the part came true about Voldemort marking me as his equal," Harry remarked thoughtfully. "But the one about Pettigrew returning to his master came on the same day it happened."

"Hmm," grunted Ron. "I suppose we should be on the lookout from now on, for some unknown female bearing gifts." He brightened. "I, for one, will give it my best efforts." He winked mischievously, though Hermione shot him a scathing look.

Harry's heart began pounding as soon as they left the cafe'. As they neared the Visitor's Entrance to the Ministry, Ron put his hands up to call a halt. "I've had a thought just now, Harry. Maybe you ought to put on your cloak. Hermione and I can pay the fine for Ondossi just as easily, and if we happen to get caught, well, at least you'll be sure to get to the Department of Mysteries on your own."

"Right," said Harry. "Though I'd rather you didn't get caught, mind." The idea of facing that eerie, hypnotic veil alone did not appeal to him at all.

"We'll hide separately; that will improve the odds of at least one of us making it," said Hermione, "Shall we plan to meet you at the veil room, say, half an hour after closing?"

Ron scoffed. "Good grief, Hermione, this is the Ministry we're talking about. Trust me, the place will be empty as a tomb within five minutes of closing time. Only gits like Percy stay late, and we needn't worry about them; they'll be locked away in their offices pretending they're doing something important." All of them chuckled.

Harry donned his cloak and slipped into the telephone booth between Ron and Hermione, who utterly ignored him as they dialed the entry code. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," said the cool, polite voice. "Please state your name and business." The greeting had not changed since Harry's dealings with the Ministry in his fifth year at Hogwarts, but those memories were not at all pleasant, and the familiar voice gave him a chill.

Ron spoke up immediately. "Ron Weasley, here to cause general mayhem, which will go unpunished because I'm the Minister's son." Hermione laughed out loud and shoved him, which was quite fortunate because Harry snorted at the unexpected comment and nearly blew his cover. A silver badge bearing the words *Ron Weasley, Hooligan* dropped out of the coin slot. Ron admired it with a huge smile before pinning it to his robe. "I should've said I was Fred or George; they'd love to have a badge like this for the shop," he whispered.

Hermione had to catch her breath before announcing her name. "I've come to pay an Apparation fine," she said, glaring at Ron lest he make her giggle again. Her badge read *Hermione Granger, Traffic Violator*, which made Ron howl with glee and Harry shake with suppressed laughter under his cloak. Hermione's eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets, and she didn't remove the badge from the slot at first. "*I* didn't do it," she said plaintively to the uncaring tardis. "I'm just paying the fine for a friend!"

"I'm sure that's what they all say," laughed Ron, but then he frowned. "Why aren't we moving, then?"

The cool voice said, "All visitors must state their name and business."

Harry gulped. Apparently the entrance could see through his cloak. There didn't seem to be any way around it. "Harry Potter," he said, his voice cracking with a nervous squeak. After clearing his throat, he continued. "I've come to... perform a few experiments." Without hesitation, a third badge clinked in the coin slot, and Harry reached out gingerly from under the cloak to pick it up.

## HARRY POTTER

### COVERT SCIENCE

"Thank you," said the voice as the floor of the entrance began its descent into the Ministry. "Visitors, please attach the badges to the front of your robes. You are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium. The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant afternoon."

Harry eyed Ron and Hermione, who obviously could not see him but were glancing about anxiously. "Pin it to your robe, Harry," whispered Ron. "It's not your fault that the cloak is hiding your robe." Hermione turned pale, but Ron wrinkled his nose confidently. "I'd offer up your wand from under the cloak as well, and if old Munch doesn't take it, that's his decision."

"RON!" hissed Hermione, but Harry rested an invisible hand on her arm.

"He's right, Hermione--that's exactly what I would have done if they *hadn't* given me a badge, eh? Either way, I'm sneaking. At least now I'm sneaking per the rules."

They crossed the Atrium without drawing so much as a glance. The guard at the registration desk recognized Ron and chatted with him for a few moments, congratulating his father's "promotion." He then registered Ron's and Hermione's wands in an utterly bored manner. Harry dutifully offered up his wand while remaining beneath the Invisibility Cloak, and went completely unnoticed.

The three of them proceeded through the golden gates to the bank of elevators, each a bit awestruck that the plan had worked so far. "With security like that, it's no wonder the Death Eaters got in here!" muttered Ron.

"Don't knock it at the moment, Ron," hissed Hermione. "Though you ought to tell your father; the very least they could do is make sure the number of badges agrees with the number of registrants."

"They used to," said Ron, pausing as they entered an elevator, but it was otherwise empty (except for a few folded parchment memos flitting overhead). "I remember coming here with the whole family and Munch counted heads--Fred and George kept him going for five minutes. Maybe the entrance got broken during the raid and no one's noticed yet."

"More's our luck, whispered Harry. "Listen, as you get off, push the button for Level Nine. Just in case someone comes in."

The doors opened on Level Six and Ron casually bumped the button for the lower floor as he exited. A witch did come in, but she scowled at the lit-up button and stomped back out, casting an angry look after Ron as she pressed harder than necessary on the wall button to summon a new elevator. The door slid shut and Harry was on his way to the Department of Mysteries.

He listened at the entry door to Level Nine for some time, until he was convinced there was no one behind it. He slipped quietly into the corridor, once again feeling a cold shiver of familiarity--another place that held nothing but bad memories. Harry forced himself to think about that pear hurtling out of the veiled archway, and stayed close to the wall as he scurried down the empty hallway.

At the entrance to the Department, Harry paused. The anteroom had been a disaster the last time he'd been here, but the black door had been returned to its hinges and looked rather imposing. He doubted that he could hear through it, even if people were shouting on the other side.

Harry nipped at the inside of his lip while he considered his next course of action. He had hoped the black door would still be blasted off, but clearly that wasn't the case. The obvious plan was to wait until someone went in or out, then slip through the door before it swung closed, but the corridor was narrower than he'd remembered. He couldn't stand in the doorway without the risk of being plowed down as people exited. *It would be handy to be able to Morph into a snake,* he thought glumly.

Just then, the black door swung open and two wizards stepped out, chatting animatedly about pro Quidditch scores from the weekend. They were apparently members of a "Fantasy Quidditch" league and were comparing the progress of their made-up teams. There was no way to get past them as they walked side-by-side, and Harry was forced to back up hastily. They were in no hurry, so Harry was able to get a few steps ahead of them, when a new thought sent a bolt of panic through him: What would happen when he reached the doorway to the elevators at the far end of the corridor? He'd be sandwiched between that door and the wizards. Even if he somehow managed to stay out of their way, the door would slam into him when they threw it open. *Why didn't I stick with the original plan and just hide in a bathroom until closing time?* Some irrational portion of his brain blamed Hermione for this mess, but that was hardly fair; the Invisibility Cloak had been Ron's suggestion, after all.

Harry was saved by good luck once again. He spotted the stairwell to Level Ten out of the corner of his eye as he passed it, and was far enough ahead of the two ersatz Quidditch managers that he leaped into it without detection. The torch above his head flickered and he held his breath as they passed, but they were busily arguing about statistics and paid it no attention. Harry rested his head against the cool stone and took several deep breaths until his heart calmed, then he grinned. Why hide in the bathroom, after all, when this convenient staircase was available?

Harry realized the answer to that question as soon as the chime went off at five o'clock. Within seconds, a hubbub of voices began echoing up the staircase; it was quitting time for the Wizengamot as well, and the stone steps would soon be filled with people heading up to the elevators. Harry gritted his teeth. The stairwell was even more narrow than the corridor! He dashed up the steps and flattened himself against the wall just to the left of the stairs, barely avoiding a collision with a tired-looking wizard hefting an overstuffed briefcase out of the Department of Mysteries.

Harry reckoned that no one from the courtroom would turn toward the Department, and he was correct; everyone was quite eager to get to the lifts and call it a day. He'd unwittingly scrambled to the one safe spot in the whole corridor, as the people leaving the Department gave the stairwell a wide berth, to avoid colliding with anyone coming off the stairs. Time and again Harry pressed back hard against the wall, grimly certain that one of the Unspeakables would walk right into him, only to watch the offending witch or wizard veer away at the last minute, missing him by scant inches.

As the flow of sorcerers through the black door began to dwindle, Harry waited for a suitable gap and leaped lightly across the corridor. This was risky, he knew, but it seemed that most of the people leaving the Department came out one at a time, and it gave Harry an idea. The black door had not quite closed when the next Unspeakable pulled it open again. A witch came out of the Department toting a broomstick that she clearly intended to ride home; it was a commuter model with a small basket nestled amongst the bristles. She was still stuffing a yellow lunch bag with a black badger embroidered on the front into the basket. *She must have been in Hufflepuff,* Harry noted offhandedly, watching the bag distort itself to the width of the basket and slump inside.

Ducking under the handle of her broomstick, Harry made sure there was no one right behind her and slipped through the black door. As he suspected, the room had been repaired, with its familiar blue candles and identical black doors lining the curved walls. But with people leaving for the day, several doors were open at once and the room showed no immediate intention of sending the walls into a whirl. Harry darted carefully to the center of the room, carefully dodging people traversing the room from all directions. It was a bit of a juggle, looking out for passers-by while trying to peek into the various doors, but he eventually spotted the doorway leading to the veil chamber. It was no longer directly across from the exit door; apparently the anteroom was not rebuilt according to its old floor plan.

Few people came out of the veil chamber door, so Harry had to wait beside it for some time before he had a chance to slip inside. He hopped over the first row of benches and sat down, steadfastly keeping his back toward the archway. Even this far away, he could feel its strange Siren call at the edge of his consciousness. It was tempting, even with his magical mirrors in his pocket, to use Legilimency and explore that thing with his magic. As Harry pondered that idea, he caught the faintest whiff of ozone and quickly recanted. He understood the sign; Fawkes would arrive in a very conspicuous fireball if Harry tried anything dangerous. He grinned warmly; having Fawkes watching his back was better than a Foe Glass and a Sneakoscope combined.

The Department was quiet, but there were still a few muffled scrapes of chairs pushing back from desks and faint echoes of "Good night" and "See you tomorrow." As Harry waited, the sounds grew further apart, then ceased altogether. Ron was right--the Ministry became a ghost town at quitting time. Harry prowled quietly to the other doorways in the veil chamber, scanning the adjoining rooms to make sure there were no stragglers. The beguiling whispers issuing from the archway were making him antsy, and he needed a distraction. He could easily understand why no one would want to hang around *this* part of the Department after hours.

Once Harry was satisfied that the surrounding rooms were empty, he returned to the external door and pulled it open just slightly. He watched through the crack as a last straggler emerged from a door on the opposite wall and charged across the polished floor. For a heartbeat, Harry thought fearfully that the wizard must be running from something, but then he realized what was happening. The man wanted to reach the exit before his office door swung shut--otherwise the walls would rotate and he would have to waste time finding his way out. Harry cheered internally for the fellow and noted that he didn't actually make it in time, but because Harry's door was open, too, the walls remained still. The man grinned proudly to himself as he departed, obviously pleased that he'd been fast enough to beat the security system.

The Department went completely silent after that, and it seemed to Harry that he waited at least an hour before the exit opened and Ron's head appeared. His face lit up when Harry poked his shoulders out from under the cloak and waved. Harry sighed with relief when Ron came into the veil chamber; the simple presence of another person diluted the pull of the archway.

"Working perfectly," Ron whispered. "We got to the window just before the bell, but it took a while to pay the fine because we didn't have the actual ticket. The fellow had to look it up in the records, and we just waited at the window and watched the whole place empty out. We hardly even needed to hide!"

Harry was about to reply when Hermione appeared in the anteroom. She had a very uncomfortable look on her face, and ran across the polished floor when Harry waved at her. "You won't believe who I just saw," she gasped, closing the door to the anteroom and leaning against it as though she expected a horde of invaders to smash into it at any moment.

Harry and Ron raised their brows expectantly. "Umbridge!" she spat. "I went to hide in the ladies' room, and when I walked in, there she was, primping." Hermione winced with an exaggerated shudder. She looked up to find them smirking and quickly became indignant. "Oh, it's easy for you two to laugh; you didn't have to see it! Merlin's bum, she was arranging her hair and batting her eyes at the mirror like she was preparing for a date... I nearly lost my supper!"

Ron laughed, but the thought was enough to turn Harry's stomach as well, and he pulled a wry face at Hermione. "Here, hold still," he said, taking out his wand. "I'll Oblivate you."

Hermione rolled her eyes and batted his wand away. "You know, I might just let you once this is all over. Yeurgh!"

The three of them snickered a bit, much longer than the situation really deserved. They were nervous, and the silence after the chuckling died only reinforced that fact. They glanced at one another uncertainly, conscientiously avoiding the direction of the archway.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get on with it," Harry finally said halfheartedly.

"Right," said Ron. "Probably ought to head down there, then." Ron jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the archway. Even as they clambered over the rows of benches, none of them looked at their destination, but when they reached the bottom of the amphitheater, they had little choice.

Harry boosted himself onto the dais, leaving two damp handprints on the smooth stone surface. Now that he was standing in front of the archway, his resolve began to waver. What if there was someone else that day, who threw the pear at them and ducked out of sight? What if he threw in the mirror and it sailed right through the veil and smashed into bits on the other side? Or worse, smashed to bits in whatever realm lay beyond the archway--how would he ever know? Suddenly the whole project seemed like a really bad idea.

"Harry?" said Hermione, startling him; she had climbed onto the dais and come right up beside him, and he hadn't even noticed. "Can I suggest that you start with something other than the mirror?"

"Yeah. That's a good idea." Harry began patting down his robes, searching for some expendable item. He turned up a silver Sickle, the change from one of his purchases.

He held it up and Hermione squeezed his arm gently. "Perfect," she said encouragingly. Harry set his jaw and squeezed the coin between his thumb and forefinger, then tossed it into the archway.

It promptly landed on the opposite side of the stone dais with a sharp clink.

All three of them stared at the coin as it rolled in an arc and flopped onto its side. "Well," said Ron, "That could have gone a little better, couldn't it?"

Hermione proved a bit more helpful. "All right, then, it obviously doesn't care for coins. I'd imagine the Unspeakables have thrown any number of things in there at some point. It's too bad we don't have access to their results; we're going to have to reinvent the wheel here, to some extent. But no matter. We know Sirius went through, and a pear went through; perhaps it only accepts living things."

Harry's stomach lurched yet again. "That'll take care of all my plans for the mirror--"

"I said 'perhaps,' Harry," Hermione interrupted rather sharply. "Let's just take this one step at a time." She began digging around in her own pockets. "Bother! I thought I had some almonds in here."

"You did. I ate them back at the Leaky Cauldron," said Ron sheepishly. "But here," he continued as he stooped to pick up the Sickle. "I'll just Transfigure this into a mouse and we'll see how *that* works."

"Do a frog; you're better at those," said Harry, and Ron paused his wand in mid-flick to start over. Seconds later, the Sickle in his hand was replaced with a Red-Eyed Tree Frog with oversized orange limbs.

"Cute little beggar," Ron noted, and set the frog down on the dais. It sat on its hindquarters, staring at the archway just like they themselves had earlier. "Go on, then," Ron urged, and nudged the frog's pointy rump with his wand. It didn't budge, apparently feeling as daunted by the archway as everybody else. Ron, however, had no empathy for the creature. "Now listen here! You'd still be a tarnished old coin if it weren't for me; you hop in there like a good frog, and if all goes well, you should be able to hop right back out!"

The frog spread its knobby, adherent toes on the granite and hunkered down defiantly. Ron sighed, and readied his wand. "All right, then, if you won't cooperate, I'll just have to help you along! *Mobilirana!*" The frog's body rose from the ground, its legs stretching as it clung to the stone, until they sprang off with a little popping sound. Ron glanced up with a glum expression. "The little fellow's laying on the guilt a bit thick, don't you think? I should have made an earthworm."

Hermione patted Ron's arm. "He'll be all right. What's the worst that can happen--he'll turn back into a coin, right? I'm not sure that Transfigured animals are really alive, anyway." She nodded and Ron pointed his wand at the archway, sending the ersatz frog on a collision course with his spell.

Though it was moving slowly, as soon as it touched the veil, it disappeared into a ripple in the fabric. All three of them jumped, despite the fact that they had anticipated just such a reaction.

"Call him back, Ron!" said Harry urgently.

Ron flicked his wand wordlessly, then repeated the motion, saying "*Accio frog*," then "*Accio coin*." Neither the tree frog nor the Sickle came forth.

"That settles that, then," said Hermione. "Apparently it's impossible to draw objects back to this side--which is probably just as well," she added pointedly. "And it does seem to tell between living and non-living."

All the air seemed to leave Harry's chest at once. "I guess that's it for the mirrors, then!" he said miserably.

"Not necessarily," mused Ron. He dug into his pockets a moment. "I wonder, maybe it's not a matter of alive or dead, maybe it's magical or non-magical." Ron finally produced a coin of his own: a golden Galleon. "This is one from the Dumbledore's Army days," he said, showing them the telltale date and time "stamped" onto it. He gave them both a knowing look--Hermione had imbued the coins with a powerful Protean charm. "Let's see how it fares." He pulled back to toss it into the arch, but Harry caught his hand.

"Wait--don't throw it. I won't be able to throw the mirror because it could break. Let's try gliding it gently, like you did with the frog."

"Might as well slide it along the ground, too," added Hermione. "Though Merlin only knows if there's a long drop on the other side, I suppose."

Nodding grimly, Ron set the coin on the dais and pointed his wand. "*Mobili...* uh, Hermione, what's the spell to move a coin?"

Hermione's brows nearly flew off her forehead. "Oh! I, um, I'm not sure." She looked mortified. Harry might have poked fun at her distress, had he but known the proper spell himself. "Hold on," she finally said. "It's gold; try *aurium*."

"*Mobiliaurium*," said Ron.

The Galleon slid obediently toward the archway, producing sighs of relief among the trio. When it vanished at the touch of the veil, Harry jumped, punching a fist victoriously

into the air. "YES!" he said loudly, though he knew better than to make too much noise. They were all too excited to care.

Hermione dashed around the archway and back. "I just wanted to make sure it didn't end up on the other side. It didn't. I think if you still want to try a mirror, Harry, now's the time."

"Yes, yes," said Harry. He was clutching both mirrors in one hand, his wand in the other. He set one down on the dais and readied his wand, his hand shaking from the pounding in his veins. He took a long breath to calm the tremor and whispered, "Please work," to the mirror, then flicked his wand. *"Mobilispeculum!"*

The mirror scudded softly over the dais to the archway and vanished.

*Over and over he tried the spell. It was not simple, but he'd cast it a million times and he knew the full sequence like he knew his own name. He just kept making one inane mistake after another. His wrist would catch, his fingers would fumble, the incantation would come out of his mouth with one misplaced letter. On and on, starting over each time and growing more and more frustrated with every attempt.*

*He could hear them taunting, the ghostly voices that were not ghosts. He couldn't remember why he wanted to cast this spell, but he had a vague feeling it was terribly important. He looked down and realized he wasn't holding his wand at all, but a very small fishing pole. Of course, that's why the spell hadn't worked. He wondered briefly how he'd mistaken this fishing pole for a wand in the first place. The fact that he knew how to operate this Muggle device even though he'd never seen one before didn't seem all that important.*

*Something tugged on the line. He wound the reel automatically. There was no fish at the other end, but something very strange and solid--something that surely didn't belong at the bottom of a lake. He sniffed it. It was a piece of fruit, but so old and rotten that the stench of it was sickening. He hurled it away hard and it struck Remus in the back of the head. He laughed, but Remus disappeared in a blinding flash of light, and he realized that it wasn't very funny at all.*

*No, in fact, something was quite wrong. He raised the fishing pole again and tried to cast it, but the air around him had become thick and viscous. It was all he could do to get the pole into position over his shoulder. How could he possibly hope to launch the shimmering lure through air like this? Wrenching, he brought the pole forward in an absurdly slow arc, but it was the best he could do. He flicked the release on the reel, but the lure didn't even drop to the ground. It just hung there unmoving at the tip of the pole, just like his arms and legs and eyes, pinned in place by unseen forces.*

*As he watched, the lure became a gold coin, then a mirror.*

*Something was definitely very wrong.*

"Do you see anything? I don't see anything."

"You won't. They'll only work for me and Sirius--it looks like a mirror to everyone else."

"And? Morgan le Fay, Harry, open your eyes!" Ron shook his shoulder. Harry steeled himself and did as he was told.

Adrenaline shot through him like lightning. "It's...it's black, but it's not just a mirror! Sirius!" he shouted, bringing the glass close to his face. "Sirius! Can you hear me?" He glanced up at Ron and Hermione for a brief instant, then returned to the mirror. "Nothing yet. SIRIUS!"

*He'd heard nothing but vague murmurs for what seemed like...well, a lifetime, if he thought about it. The haunting voices around him were always too soft to understand, their meaning hovering just beyond his comprehension. It had been exasperating, and yet in many ways, it was just a mild annoyance, as transient as the buzzing of a fly.*

*As he stood motionless with the fishing pole, he heard a clear, loud voice. Someone was shouting into his ear, yet there was no one there. It, too, was taunting him. "Fishing? You can't be serious." The lure sparkled at him on the end of the pole, glinting like a brilliant firework. Any fish would chase it down, eager to bite it.*

*"You can't be serious."*

*He tried to speak, but his breath was locked down as tightly as his limbs. He knew the voice demanded an answer--it was very, very important to say something. His life depended on it, though he couldn't say why. He sucked desperately at the glassy air, trying to force some sound from his throat. "Nnng," he managed to grunt, his tongue too thick to form a proper letter.*

*He kept at it, beginning to panic. Not because he couldn't breathe; that fact didn't upset him in the slightest. The words, the words, he had to say the words, any words. "Nnm. Nnnmmm. Immmm."*

*Just as suddenly, the air became fluid once more. "I am serious."*

"That was him!" bellowed Harry, and he bolted toward the archway. Fortunately, Ron tackled him and brought him down on the dais, but Harry could think of nothing but reaching into that veil. He tried to crawl out from Ron's grasp. "Lemme go, I heard him, he's in there!"

"Harry!" shouted Hermione, planting herself between him and the archway and shaking his shoulders. "All right, we believe you, but you've got to use your head!"

"He's been in there a year, Harry, two more minutes won't hurt!" groaned Ron, straining against his struggling friend.

Something sunk in, as Harry stopped his frantic efforts. "Okay, okay," he said, sitting up, then helping the others to their feet. "He sounded terrible! I couldn't make out what he said, it was all slurred. We have to help him!" Ron kept a wary focus on him, as Harry's limbs and body kept twitching toward the archway as if he meant to take flight at any moment.

"We will, Harry, we will," said Hermione, but the look on her face belied her words. None of them had any idea what to do next, and they all knew it.

*He was awake... or was he merely dreaming that he was awake? Something was not right, but everything was unclear, unfocused, monochromatic. "Where am I?" he muttered softly, unconcerned that mere seconds before he was frozen in place, unable to breathe.*

*He saw a flash from the lure. Ah, yes, he was fishing. But wasn't Remus here a minute ago, too? Did he go swimming? Then he heard Harry's voice, which was odd, for he knew Harry wasn't here. Harry was shouting so loudly that he turned angrily to look for him and tell him to quiet down, but the lad was nowhere to be seen. Harry's words were slow and garbled but filled with urgency, and he strained to make them out. It sounded like "we have to help him."*

*Remus must be in trouble! Drowning? He remembered, he'd just hit him in the head with that fruit, maybe it knocked Remus out and he fell in the water! But he looked around, and there was no water, no Remus, no Harry... only a murky gray landscape without a horizon, and the fishing pole in his hand.*

*He did the only thing that made any sense. Raising the pole over his head again, he cast it. The reel spun freely as the line played out, but the fishing lure remained hanging there at the end of the pole.*

*He was almost positive that was not how they were supposed to work.*



Harry paced rapidly before the archway. Ron stared into it, seemingly waiting for inspiration to strike. Hermione held her hands to her temples, her lips moving as though she were reading an invisible book out loud with a silent voice.

Ron had conjured a length of rope and tried to toss one end into the archway, but it had flopped to the ground when it hit the veil, as though it were a solid wall. Hermione snatched it from him and set one end on the ground by itself, then tossed in the other end, but the entire rope had vanished with a tiny pop the instant the far end touched the veil. It was clear that you were either inside or out of the thing; there was no hovering at the threshold.

"We can't pull him out, that's obvious," said Ron, in a surprisingly calm, assured voice. "The other things we've put in have not come out, but the pear did, therefore it's possible to get out. I think we have to assume that Sirius threw the pear. Either he can't or won't throw the other things back out, but he has the capability. Since he can throw other objects out of there, he can probably put himself out too. Why won't he?"

"It's dark in there," said Harry. "Maybe he can't see the exit. Maybe he's on a precipice or something and doesn't dare move. Maybe he's being held in there!" Harry wrung his hands in frustration. "Anything could be happening!" He held up the mirror again, tilting it as though he might spy something from a different angle. "Sirius, I know you're there," he said to the glass. "Can you talk? We want to help you!"

Before Harry completed the sentence, a streak of red sparks shot out of the archway. It was a signal from a wand.

"SIRIUS!" Harry howled, once again lunging instinctively toward the archway, but he stopped himself before Ron knocked him down again. He clenched his fists. "We can't help him unless we know what's keeping him there! I don't care," he said abstractly, as though speaking to someone outside of the room, "I'm using Legilimency. We have to know!"

Harry opened his arms toward the archway as though he were holding a huge, delicate ball in his hands. Ron and Hermione leapt up to stop him, but they never even made it to their feet. A fiery explosion threw both of them off the dais to the third row of stone benches.

*"I know you're there," shouted Harry. ' Confound that boy, what's the meaning of all this yelling? He's going to scare away all the fish!' But with his best lure obstinately hanging there at the end of the pole, the fishing was bound to be poor anyway. He took the lure in his hand; it wasn't even tied to the line. No wonder it didn't cast properly.*

*'And look, there's a nice line right there I can use.' It was beautiful, fine and thin and glowing red, the only color in his entire vision. He smiled. Somehow he knew, as he always just knew things in this place, that this was the toughest, strongest line he could ever hope to find. He reached up and delicately took it between his fingertips.*

None of them could see anything, just an expanding ball of flame, but it dissipated in one blinding rush. It took a moment for their eyes to readjust to the dim torchlight in the room, but they could hear it. Harry was sobbing.

Ron pulled himself to his feet, some part of him wondering where Hermione had been thrown by the blast, but for the moment he had to see what had happened on the dais. The first thing he saw was a tiny, naked baby bird, curled into a ball near the edge of the dais. Ron scooped it up instinctively, knowing it needed to stay warm.

Harry was kneeling on the stone, his head bent. He was cradling something in his lap.

A hand reached up and patted Harry clumsily on the face.

"Wha'smatter, Harry? Bad dream?" said Sirius Black.

*A/N: For my printout of this chapter, I managed to find the font for Sirius's handwriting, rather than the italics I have to use here. For even more fun, I airbrushed the text of the "inside the veil" sections in Adobe Photoshop with dark green, teal, blue, and purple, to give it a gloomy, dreamlike feel. Of course, any reference to Fawkes or his magic was printed in bright red.*

*Basileio Oneiro is Greek for Fortress of Dreams. Seems the Veil wasn't hiding what we thought it was hiding.*

## 22: Awakening

Chapter 22 of 50

The Order makes note of the Trio's recent accomplishment.



Remus Lupin picked up the tiny box on the mantel in the drawing room and resumed pacing. He muttered softly to himself, frequently ceasing both his words and his steps abruptly, only to start anew after an anxious expression and a deep breath or two. At one point he set the box back down, pressing it against the marble as he worked it open; the hinge was far too stiff. He opened and closed it several times to soften the spring. When the action finally suited him, he paused reverently to arrange the contents: a small but elegant diamond ring, nestled in the velvet lining.

Glancing for the hundredth time at the drawing room door to assure himself it was closed and bolted, he returned the box to the mantel once again. He continued to pace, this time without mumbling, though the look on his face was no less intense. He had finished planning and rehearsing the words he would say; now it was time to convince himself to go downstairs and say them. People were just sitting down to dinner. With any luck, he'd be ready by the time the kitchen was empty again--empty except for Adora, who had agreed to meet him for a late supper.

After another five minutes of pacing, he picked up the box again and worked the hinge a few more times. At this rate, the box would open itself at the right moment, out of a conditioned reflex.

This was madness. He was a marked man, Voldemort's next target. What in the name of Merlin was he thinking? *I love her. So you'll make her a widow? At least she'll have that to remember--that she was truly loved.* Just what she needs hanging around her neck like an albatross, that her "one true love" lies buried or, worse, forgotten on some battlefield. *No! She's a soldier too, she knows the risks--she cherishes the time we have together, just as I do.* And how many times have you believed that, if by some miracle you survive and she does not, you will never find another? *That's different. I'm a werewolf, she's not; it'll be easier for her to move on.* It would be easiest for her to move on **now**, if you were man enough to let her go, even send her on her way.

Lupin stopped pacing and threw himself into one of the easy chairs, his knuckles white as they gripped his hair in a feeble attempt to silence his internal dialog. He was staring at the box on the mantel again when the fireplace below it burst into emerald flames.

"Hermione? What in--Harry? You too? And I just..." Lupin's voice shriveled to nothing as his gaze moved past the paradox of Harry's tears and euphoric smile, onto the dark form draped heavily on Harry's shoulders. He was dimly aware of a fourth person coming through the Floo, and of Hermione dashing out of the room, and of shouting, laughing, crying, but such things barely registered. His mind was reeling, trying to grasp the incomprehensible, to somehow make the sight before him jibe with reality.

*I'm dreaming. I've gone mad. I'm dead.*

Then Harry was beside him, leaning onto him for support, and so was the other. He felt Harry's cool, wet tears, felt the young man's body trembling from excitement and exhaustion. Lupin dared not believe his eyes and ears, but touch was irrefutable. He threw his arms about both of them, fearfully and desperately taking on the weight of Harry's burden.

Warm gray eyes met his own and a brief but jaunty grin flashed from a weary face, and Lupin's heart accepted what his mind could not.

"Sirius."

By the time Hermione returned (trailed by the entire crowd from the kitchen), Harry and Lupin had managed to settle Sirius into one of the armchairs. He was pale and weak and could barely talk, but his expressions were quite clear and spoke volumes: he was utterly mystified by their behaviors and wondered what all the fuss was about.

"Drink this," said Hermione, shoving a pewter tankard of water to his lips and tipping it for him. He drained it in a long series of gulps, looking surprised by the recognition of his own thirst. Someone handed her a pitcher and she refilled and served the tankard again, but Sirius pulled it away after drinking half of it. "Thank you," he rasped, his hand falling away from the vessel as he tried to grasp the handle. He frowned at the hand as though it was a foreign thing, perplexed by its unwillingness to obey his wishes.

"You're very weak. Just let us help you," admonished Harry, continuing to smile and cry at the same time.

As if to prove Harry wrong, Sirius placed a clumsy but tender hand on his shoulder. He moistened his lips several times and coughed, then spoke. "What in Merlin's name is all the fuss about? I just fell asleep, is all. Sleeping. Nothing amiss."

Harry and Lupin had the same impulse to crush Sirius in a hug, and ended up clunking their heads together ~~en route~~. "Of course, Sirius, just be patient with us," said Lupin with a groan as he clutched the goose egg already developing on his forehead. "We've got some explaining to do."

At that point, Sirius took in the crowd of strangers gawking at him and uncertainty dawned in his eyes. "Uh, Reem? Where... who are all these people?"

Harry answered him, squeezing him about the shoulders joyfully. "They're the Order, Sirius. The Order of the Phoenix! This is only a handful of the ranks now; we're at Headquarters!"

Sirius blinked, then glanced about the room, his eyes widening as he took in the warm, clean appearance and the dour Black Family Tapestry in the corner. He gaped in disbelief, first at Harry, then at Lupin. "This is *my* house?" he croaked, his dry, disused voice breaking in surprise.

Harry and Lupin eyed one another mirthfully. "You know, I suppose it is," smirked Lupin, shaking his head. "Though we may have to dig out the deed itself, to make sure." He hugged Sirius again, and though Sirius accepted it, he looked more bewildered and distracted than ever.

Molly Weasley arrived in the doorway at that moment with a steaming bowl of soup and some bread. Rather than jostling her way through the spectators, she loudly insisted that everyone clear out and let the poor man regain a little strength. There was something unquestioningly authoritative about her, though her wand was nowhere to be seen. Despite a few quiet grumbles, all present promptly filed out of the drawing room. When Harry and Lupin were the only ones remaining, she glared at them and approached with the soup. Sirius winked at Harry, who shrugged, smiling, and left him to Molly's ministrations.

They had scarcely reached the stairway when Lupin took Harry by the arms and pulled him around until they faced each other. The wonder in Lupin's eyes was being displaced by suspicion and distrust. "Harry... *how?*" he asked solemnly.

"We pulled him out from that veil, Remus! Come on, I'll tell you the whole story."

Harry led the way to his bedroom on the second floor. He sat on the window seat and waited for Lupin to close the door, then recounted the whole story of their trip to the Ministry. "I'm still not quite sure what happened at the very end. Fawkes showed up and went incendiary on the spot, and then the next thing I knew, Sirius was staggering out of the archway. Well, more like he fell out of it, right onto me, and I caught him."

His eyes suddenly wide, Harry jumped up off the sill. "Oh, my God! Fawkes! I have to go back and find him!"

He headed for the door, but Lupin caught him by the arms again. "You're not going anywhere, Harry," he said severely. "Sit down. I'll send someone after Fawkes."

Harry gulped. He had only heard Lupin use that tone once before, during his third year at Hogwarts. It was in the Shrieking Shack, when he, Ron, and Hermione were confronting Sirius and Peter Pettigrew for the first time. Lupin had meant business then, and he meant it now. Though Harry knew it was his duty to tend to Fawkes, he dropped his gaze and sat obediently on the windowsill. He didn't budge until Lupin returned.

"Ron had Fawkes. He's fine," Lupin held out a tiny chick cupped in his hand. Harry took the phoenix and cuddled him in the crook of his elbow, petting his damp, fuzzy down. "Finish your story," said Lupin bluntly.

"There's really nothing else to tell," said Harry, subdued. "The three of us hauled Sirius up to the Atrium as fast as we could and Flooed over here. Obviously Ron must

have grabbed Fawkes on the way--Hey!" Harry yanked his hand away and shook it. "He bit me!" he exclaimed.

"I'm not surprised," said Lupin flatly.

Harry's jaw seemed to fall all the way to the floor of the room *below* his. "Remus, what's the matter with you? We RESCUED SIRIUS!"

"I know very well what you did. And while I'm... while I can't even describe how glad I am to see Sirius, I'm also very angry with you, Harry." He folded his arms and glared until the younger man averted his eyes.

"I wasn't *alone*, you know, I had--" began Harry, but Lupin raised his hand in a no-nonsense gesture for silence. Harry's shoulders drooped in resignation. He set his hands in his lap and twiddled his thumbs nervously as he waited for Lupin to read him the riot act.

He didn't have to wait long. "I made it clear last night that it's too dangerous for you to go out alone." Lupin's voice was cooler and softer than ever, which was somehow worse than if he had yelled or ranted. "I *know* you understood me, Harry, because that was the first thing you said just now to defend yourself. Technically speaking, you weren't alone. But we both know that *technically speaking*, you wouldn't be alone if you had a Muggle with you either. Or a Death Eater, for that matter! In terms of your protection, Harry, there's a big difference between the company of someone in the Order *versus* other students! I'm *embarrassed* that I have to stand here and explain this to you."

That stung. Harry stared fixedly at a wrinkle in the rug below Lupin's feet.

Lupin's voice finally took on an angry timbre. "I anticipated that this might happen, Harry. I hoped it wouldn't--I hoped you'd grown out of your willful, reckless habits. I thought that witnessing Dumbledore's death might have finally made it clear that even the most powerful wizards can be cornered and overwhelmed. I *trusted* you to keep your word and use your head." He paused a moment to let that sink in, but there was no need; Harry just wanted to crawl under a rock and wriggle with the earthworms by that point.

Lupin sighed, a sad, defeated sound. "But as I said, I anticipated this. I'd made arrangements a long time ago, hoping I'd never have to implement them. I almost did it last night, but I thought you had listened to me. Having to accept that it was all just lip service, Harry... well, I've already made it clear how I feel about this whole business. Now it's time to act.

"As of today, I'm assigning you a bodyguard. You're not to leave this house until he arrives. Hopefully he'll be able to come right away and escort you back to Hogwarts in time for class tomorrow. One of the Aurors will take Ron and Hermione back this evening, at any rate; I *assume* that once you're under guard, they won't run off alone without you. If you think they might, Harry, tell me now--I can assign guards for them, too, if they need it." Lupin paused, then spoke more firmly. "I want an answer, Harry. Do I need to assign guards to Ron and Hermione?"

Harry raised his head. "No. They won't leave Hogwarts. They wouldn't have left today if it weren't for me."

Lupin held his gaze a moment longer, then nodded. "All right, then. I'm glad I won't have to pull anyone else from the field."

Wriggling with the earthworms was sounding better and better all the time, but there was only so much guilt Harry could take before it transformed into anger. Lupin must have sensed that Harry had nearly reached his quota; his face softened at last and he laid a firm hand on Harry's shoulder. "I should have done it a long time ago anyway," he said gently. "James and Sirius and I always had each other's backs, and we were... well, no one ever got the better of us when we acted together, let's put it that way. It was only when we were separated that we had any trouble."

Harry looked him in the eye. "Ron and Hermione and I are like that."

Lupin gave him a half-smile. "Only to a point, Harry. You and Ron and Hermione are also the prime targets of the entire Dark Army. That's a lot of powerful enemies for three students to hold off."

Harry averted his eyes for a moment. "I'm sorry, Remus," he said, simply and sincerely.

At that moment, a beautiful arpeggio issued forth from the vicinity of Harry's elbow. Fawkes had stretched out his neck and was singing in a delicate soprano. Both wizards listened raptly, holding their breath. When he finished his song, Fawkes waggled his pointy rump into a cozy spot, tucked his bill under his featherless wing, and closed his eyes.

"I think he's forgiven you," said Lupin. Harry furrowed his brow in confusion, and Lupin continued. "He died tonight, you know--to save you. Just because he's reborn every time doesn't mean it's easy for him. Or painless."

Harry looked down at the little ball of fluff tucked in the crook of his arm and felt a fresh pang of guilt. He covered Fawkes's back with his hand to warm him, which resulted in a tiny chirp and a contented wriggle.

"The worst part is that he can't protect you now, not until he grows again," continued Lupin. "That's why he waits until his feathers are literally falling out before he burns up under normal circumstances, you know. He hates this period in between, knowing that he's helpless to protect you if you need him."

"How do you know these things?" asked Harry quietly.

"I don't--not for sure, anyway. But I do understand what it's like when your body goes through harsh transitions." Lupin grinned wryly. "Plus, I know he loves you desperately; that's why he Bonded to you. Knowing that you're vulnerable has to be torture for him." Lupin's voice thickened as the ring in its little box popped unbidden into his thoughts. "He'd be devastated if he lost you because he couldn't be there when you needed him."

A fresh tear slipped down Harry's cheek. He lifted up the little cygnet and kissed him on the head. Fawkes nuzzled Harry's chin, but his little eyes were droopy, as though he might fall asleep at any second. Harry briefly rubbed the arch of Fawkes's skinny neck and then tucked the cygnet into the inner pocket of his silk robes, right over his heart.

Wiping away the tear with his palm, Harry spoke, his voice rattling with emotion. "Yet he knows I'm not immortal. Poor Fawkes. I wonder how he can stand it, giving away his heart, even his *life*, knowing that no matter *what*, he's going to have to carry on alone again, sooner or later."

Lupin thought again of the box on the mantel in the drawing room, and had no answer.

The sounds of an excited crowd began to filter up from the staircase, and with one deep look in Lupin's eyes, Harry saw that his anger and frustration had passed. "Well, now that's done, shall we go meet Sirius again?" Harry asked. Lupin responded by crushing Harry to his chest in a quick, tearful hug, and then pulled him down the stairs by the wrist at top speed.

Molly Weasley had stuffed Sirius with soup and bread to her satisfaction and announced that visiting hours were now open. Judging by the squeals currently issuing from the drawing room, Tonks was at the forefront of the welcoming committee. As Harry and Lupin dashed in, Sirius looked at them with pleading eyes above his enormous smile. Tonks was squeezing him nearly inside out, laughing and crying at the same time such that only a loud wail was coming out of her mouth. All the solemnity dropped away from Lupin at last, and he simply piled onto Sirius's other side and commenced with his own howl of pure joy.

When all available members of the Order had mauled Sirius to their hearts' content, he was finally permitted to flop back into his chair in a cheery daze. Seeing that all eyes were upon him, Sirius shrugged in a flustered way and shook his head. "Well then. It's very nice to see you all again," he said, "though for the life of me, it only seems like a

few hours since the last time. Does anyone mind telling me just what in the name of Merlin I got myself into, then?"

That calmed the excited atmosphere even further. Lupin and Arthur Weasley eyed each other uncertainly. "Sirius," said Lupin in a slow, level voice, "what do *you* remember?"

Sirius blinked, then frowned. "I'm not sure, Reem. I've been asleep, haven't I? It feels like I've slept for days, or weeks, even. The dreams I was having... they were so long and so complicated, I don't know how I could have dreamed them all in one night."

"Do you remember what you were doing before you, uh, went to bed?" said Lupin tactfully.

Sirius frowned harder, concentrating. "I... I was talking in the Floo downstairs... with Sniv--with Snape. He said... he told me that Harry thought I was being held prisoner in the... in the Ministry of Magic?" Sirius cocked his head and peered at Lupin in a silent query. Though Lupin nodded assuringly, Sirius looked skeptical of his own memory, but he continued his story.

"Next were all standing around arguing about who should go help Harry, and whether we should wait for Dumbledore. I shoved Snape up against the wall and told him this was all his fault for stopping the Occlumency lessons. I remember I told Kreacher to wait here and send Dumbledore along when he arrived." He paused, scrunching up his face with the effort to recall further. "It seems like we Flooed somewhere; I remember the green flame and the spinning, but from there... Did I fall, maybe? That's the last I remember: green light and a feeling of falling for a long, long way... was I sucked off into the Floo Network?"

Lupin sighed. "No, Sirius, you weren't. We all took the Floo to the Ministry. From the Atrium, we went straight to the Department of Mysteries. We found Harry, and others--" he gestured toward Ron and Hermione "--battling with a band of Death Eaters in the interior. You took out at least two of them, then you faced off with Bellatrix Lestrange."

Sirius reared his head in confusion; this was obviously news to him. "Please tell me I smacked her down," he said, but judging by the look on his face, he already guessed the answer.

Lupin shook his head. "In a word, no. She knocked you into... something. An archway, with a veil; some sort of artifact hidden in the Department. We all assumed it was some sort of gateway to... well, to SOME other world, presumably the Underworld. We didn't know what had happened to you, but we all thought you were gone. Dead."

Sirius stared at his oldest friend for some time, then snorted in disdain. "The day my cousin Smellatrix can kill me in a duel will truly be the end of the world. You ought to know that, Reem," he chided.

Lupin chuckled. "You're right, Padfoot; I should have known you were up to something." He resumed his somber tone. "But all the signs agreed with it. Your will revealed itself, just as though you had died, and Harry clearly had possession of the house and Kreacher. We just... believed the worst." Tears suddenly welled in Lupin's eyes.

Sirius promptly threw a small pillow at Lupin's head. "I promise if your will reveals itself, I'll assume you're dead and return the favor," he said with gruff affection. "Besides, no harm, no foul, eh? I'm back *and* the house is all clean!" He turned to Harry with a big grin. "Your mum was always tidying up the common room after us; I should have guessed you'd inherit the neat gene."

Lupin and Tonks smirked and Harry laughed outright. "Interesting," added Harry innocently. "I seem to have passed it on in unexpected directions."

They all spent the next hour dining in the drawing room with Sirius (who ate ravenously despite his recent meal), explaining the state of Grimmauld Place and the Order. Arthur Weasley and Lupin did most of the talking, which suited everyone just fine; they did a nice job of skirting the heavy issues that no one wanted to talk about. Eventually, however, Sirius began to detect that there were pieces missing and brought them up himself. The first came as he took a hard look around the room and suddenly asked, "Where's Dumbledore?"

After a strained silence, Mr. Weasley spoke up. "Dumbledore was murdered, Sirius. Some four months ago."

Sirius turned pale, gripping the arms of his chair. "Who?"

"Severus Snape," said Mr. Weasley quietly.

A series of contractions coursed over the muscles in Sirius's face and his skin went from white to red in a matter of seconds. He finally spoke through gritted teeth. "Still alive?"

Mr. Weasley gave him a stern look. "He escaped. There's been no sign of him since. And before you get all worked up about revenge, bear in mind that you'll have to go to the end of a very long queue." Every head in the room swung in unison toward Mr. Weasley. Such sentiments did not come out of his mouth very often and were worth confirming.

It seemed to mollify Sirius somewhat, as he bowed his head and stared thoughtfully at his knees. "Four months," he said absently. He took a long, critical look at Harry. "You've grown. I saw it before, but I was a little too overwhelmed to put it all together. Just how long have I been gone?"

Harry flattened his lips in an unwilling grimace, then answered as calmly as he could. "A year ago in June. It's just October now, so a year and three months."

Sirius's jaw fell. "October... Mother of Merlin, I've been asleep for more than a year?"

Mr. Weasley took over again. "I'm not so sure. There was a lot of destruction in the Department that night--in particular, the Time Room had a great deal of damage. The Unspeakables never recovered the Time that was lost that night. There's been a lot of speculation about where it went. We know Time is subject to gravity, so we expected it to pool in the lowest point in the Department. That would be the amphitheater in the Veil Room, unless it managed to escape from the Department into the hallway. We never found it down on Level Ten, but it wasn't in the Veil Room either. I have a feeling it followed you through the veil."

Sirius reached up and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You know, this is about three day's worth of whiskers," he said. "And I've shaved every day since I moved back in this house, just for something to do."

"That's it, then!" said Hermione. "You must have been floating in a pool of Time for most of your absence. You aged only a few days, even though a year passed for the rest of us. That would also explain how you survived so long without food or water."

"Do you remember throwing something during the time you were dreaming?" asked Harry pointedly.

"I do!" said Sirius. "I was... let me see, I was *fishing*, of all things, and this nasty piece of rotten fruit--it might have been an apple--got hooked on my line. I nailed Reem in the head with it!" He smiled impishly; Harry and Lupin exchanged a glance. "I barely had time to cast the line again when I woke up... which of course was when you pulled me out of there. That's right," he said, recalling more of the dream, "I thought I'd knocked Remus into the lake, and I heard you, Harry, saying, 'he needs help, we have to help him,' something like that. Then I saw your line and grabbed it. I had just enough time to realize that if you'd thrown it to Remus, you might need my help pulling him out--and then *you* pulled *me* out."

Harry needed a moment to muddle through that, but fortunately Lupin took over the explanations. "You hit me with that fruit just over a month ago, Sirius. Harry and I were down there after... well, more on that later. Regardless, Harry had a bag of pears, and one rolled into the veil. It came back out and hit me on the head, just as you said."

"Perhaps the fruit got caught in some sort of time vortex, so it grew old and rotten before it reached you," said Hermione, frowning. "It must have reversed again when you threw it out, or perhaps the effects of the rogue Time didn't persist once it came back to our side. Either way, one month for *us* passed by in the blink of an eye for you!"

"And I never threw you a line, not then or now," noted Harry. "We tried to throw in a rope tonight, but it just disappeared."

"No, it wasn't a rope," said Sirius. "It was just like a fishing line, Harry--except it was red. Glowing red, actually, as thin as a hair, and perfectly straight too. It seemed to go on forever in both directions. And it showed up just seconds after I threw the fruit. That's why I thought I'd find Remus on the other end of it."

Around the room, people puzzled over this latest mystery, but soon all eyes fell upon Harry. He was clutching at his chest with a grimace of pain. Stunned, no one moved at first, then several people leapt to their feet to attend him. Harry gave a weak but reassuring wave with one hand as the other fumbled awkwardly at the collar of his robe.

"I'm all right," he finally gasped. "I just... that red line, I've seen it before. It was Fawkes. That's what his magic looks like." Harry extracted Fawkes from his inner pocket and held the tiny cygnet in his palm. His down had dried in the warmth of Harry's robe and he looked quite fuzzy and cuddly, save for his long, sharp bill. "I didn't pull you out at all, Sirius; Fawkes did it."

"Dumbledore's Fawkes?" said Sirius in surprise.

Harry felt an irrational surge of jealousy at those words, followed immediately by chagrin. Sirius looked taken aback and Harry knew his anger had shown on his face, which made him even more embarrassed. "He's sort of my Fawkes now," he mumbled with a guilty shrug.

Sirius exchanged a knowing look with Lupin but said nothing. There was a gleam in his eye, though, that seemed either impressed or proud, and it filled Harry with a warm sense of relief. *Look at me, getting jealous... We're Bonding stronger and stronger all the time, aren't we?* he mused, absently bringing the phoenix up to his cheek for a nuzzle. Sharp, shrewd eyes peered at him from crimson fluff, and Harry was certain that Fawkes knew his thoughts and agreed completely.

As the conversation resumed, Fawkes began to chirp and whistle quietly but urgently, and Harry realized that his familiar was hungry. Fawkes eyed the cherry pie that some thoughtful soul had brought up for dessert, but Harry tapped his beak. "No sweets for you until you've had a good meal," he whispered. Harry had no idea of what constituted good nutrition for a hatchling phoenix. Fawkes was no help; he avoided Harry's inquisitive gaze and stared intently at the pie.

Beckoning Remus closer, Harry pointed at the cygnet and mouthed, "Hungry." Fawkes confirmed the point by stretching his neck straight up and opening his bill in a characteristic pose of hungry baby birds of all species. Lupin nodded straightaway and excused the two of them from the drawing room.

"Do you know what to feed him, Harry?" asked Lupin in a low voice as they passed the portraits in the hall.

"I don't," said Harry with a pang of guilt. "He wants pie."

Lupin scowled. "He needs to eat something good for him. We'll have to Floo Hagrid." Fawkes let out a disgruntled hoot that made both of them snicker.

It proved impossible to reach Hagrid by Floo, which Harry had suspected, based on his knowledge of the tricky connection in Hagrid's fireplace. Lupin ended up having to Floo Professor McGonagall, who made it clear she'd prefer to roast Harry on a spit than to run off and summon Hagrid at that moment. The plaintive chirps of a desperately hungry phoenix are hard to resist, however, and she soon relented for Fawkes's sake. Harry and Lupin succumbed as well; by the time Hagrid appeared in the Floo, they'd fed Fawkes a huge slice of pie.

"Are yeh daft? Yeh can' give a baby pie jus' coz he wants it!" grumbled Hagrid as he brushed the ashes from his moleskin coat. "Course he's gonna wannit! That don' mean it's good fer him, though!" He scooped Fawkes out of Harry's hand with two fingers and eyed the fluffy cygnet appraisingly. "He needs somethin' that'll stick ter his ribs! Izzere any butter about?"

Harry felt a bit squeamish as he watched Hagrid shovel butter by the spoonful into Fawkes's gaping maw. It was clearly what the little fellow needed, though; he appeared to grow right before Harry's eyes. "There's a good boy," Hagrid cooed encouragingly as Fawkes pumped and rattled his little gullet. Harry felt another jealous pang that *he* should be the one feeding Fawkes, but Hagrid looked so blissfully happy, he let it go... this time.

After devouring more than his own weight in butter, Fawkes's neck began to weave back and forth as he stretched up for his next gulp. "I think he's getting full," said Harry. Hagrid nodded, but raised the spoon again. Fawkes seemed to swallow it in slow motion, his little eyes drooping at half mast, but he gamely opened up his mouth once more.

"Uh, Hagrid?" said Harry nervously. "Don't you think he's full?"

Hagrid contentedly dropped in another dollop. "Not jus' yet." Fawkes nearly missed it, his neck was wobbling so drunkenly. Again he barely swallowed it, as though his stomach was too full and the butter was backlogging in his throat. Still, the little mouth tipped upwards.

"Hold still, little feller," Hagrid said soothingly as he tried to position the spoon over his flailing target. Fawkes snapped his bill and caught most of the butter, but a large blob fell to the tabletop. He didn't even make the swallowing motion this time, just opened his mouth for more. Sweat beaded on Harry's upper lip, and he caught Hagrid's arm when the giant scooped up another spoonful.

Hagrid looked up at him with a dazed expression. "Ah, I'm sorry, Harry. Here, you feed him." He handed over the spoon with a warm grin.

"Hagrid!" Harry was certain the little phoenix would either choke to death or explode. Hagrid peered at him incomprehendingly, obviously wondering why on Earth Harry wasn't stuffing in the next bite. At that moment, however, Fawkes let out a burble of pure contentment and flopped flat onto the table, feet and wings sprawling on either side and his neck stretched out to its fullest. Hagrid beamed.

"That'll hold him fer a while!" the giant boomed triumphantly. "Now, is there any bacon?"

All Harry could do was stare. Lupin put a paternal arm around his shoulder. "Hagrid's been caring for Fawkes a long time. I think you can trust him on this."

"But... look at him!" Harry pointed in horror at the unconscious cygnet.

"In' he beau'iful?" said Hagrid, oblivious to Harry's distress. "He'll grow the size of a pigeon durin' his nap, an' he'll wake up hungry! No more pie for him, though, 'til he's leas' as big as a chicken. Fruit's not rich enough. He needs a lotter energy teh grow so fas'."

Harry sighed in defeat and picked up the limp cygnet. Fawkes really had grown; Harry could barely stuff him into the pocket that he'd slipped into easily a mere two hours before. Hagrid watched approvingly, then pointed to a cast-iron skillet hanging on the wall.

"Fry up about three pounds o' bacon fer his nex' meal, Harry, an' see if there's some olive oil. He's boun' ter be thirsty, too."

Hagrid returned to Hogsmeade by Floo and took Ron and Hermione with him. It was well after 9:00 by the time they Flooed to the Three Broomsticks, but at least they'd get past Filch with Hagrid as their escort. Knowing full well that if the Headmistress wasn't standing at the door when they arrived, they'd be marching straight to her office, Harry pleaded to go too. Lupin wouldn't hear a word of it.

"Your bodyguard will arrive tomorrow afternoon. You'll remain in this house until then. Full stop. And if you feel guilty that your friends are going to get the brunt of Professor McGonagall's wrath, *good*. Remember that the next time you get the urge to go out on your own." Lupin glared at him sternly, but he relented a bit as he handed Harry the frying pan. "Better get going. That bacon's not going to cook itself. I have a feeling you're in for a long night, Harry."

At 2 AM, Sirius Black appeared at the top of the kitchen stairs. His legs were trembling, but he sat on the top step for a breather and waved at Harry to go on with what he was doing.

Harry had little choice. Fawkes was awake for the third time that night, his appetite more fierce each time. About the size of a duck now, Fawkes gulped the butter so quickly that Harry didn't have time to refill the spoon before the phoenix howled desperately for more. Feathers poked out from his down, each one rolled tight around its axis and encased in a waxy sheath. Fawkes looked for all the world like a long-necked hedgehog, although at least the quills weren't sharp.

By the time Sirius managed to plod down the stairs to the kitchen, Harry, too, was shaking. "Hey," he gasped between frantic spoonfuls, "You should be in bed."

Sirius watched the proceedings with awe. "You should too. Morgan le Fay, Harry, he's an eating machine, isn't he?" Harry nodded without answering.

After a moment or two, Sirius asked, "Would it help if I grabbed a spoon too?"

Harry shook his head. "I think we're over the worst part. He's slowing down. A few more bites and he'll be ready for bacon."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "A bird after my own heart." He stretched his hand toward the platter of bacon on the table next to Fawkes, but stopped short after a glare from Harry.

"That's his. I'll cook some for you if he eats it all, but believe me, we *don't* want to run out."

"No worries," said Sirius. "I'll find something else." He continued to watch Harry with an expression of bemused fascination. Harry, focused completely on the task at hand, didn't even look up again until Fawkes was halfway through the bacon. He was taken aback by Sirius's expression. "What?"

Sirius smiled ruefully, shaking his head. "Nothing. Just... You know you look just like your father."

"Except for the eyes, yeah." Harry rolled those very eyes in annoyance.

Sirius smirked. "Right, the eyes. But I swear, Harry, I've seen James in the exact same pose as you're in now, right down to the slump of your shoulders. It's uncanny. And you know what he was doing at the time?"

Harry was too tired to come up with a sassy remark, so he settled for a weak shrug.

"He was tending to you," said Sirius wistfully. "You were about a week old. You woke up every few hours hungry, day and night, just like all new babies. Prongs and Lily were worn out, but the minute you cried, they were right on it, seeing to whatever you needed. I'd never seen James so tired, and yet he was so happy, so *enthralled* to have this noisy little bundle to take care of. That's how you look now, Harry." Sirius smiled warmly, then cleared his throat. "Ah, listen to me, sentimental sap. I've been in Dreamland too long."

Harry shook his head. "It's not sappy. It's nice, hearing things like that about my dad." He felt a brief tug at his hand and looked down. Fawkes had lunged at the bacon he was holding and snapped off half of it, which he was quietly gnashing in his bill.

"Look at that!" said Sirius. "Strong enough to chew it himself, already!"

Harry offered the rest of the bacon and beamed proudly as Fawkes snatched it from his fingers. He heard the scrape of Sirius's chair but was startled nonetheless when his godfather's hand came to rest on his shoulder. Harry pulled the plate of bacon within closer reach and put one arm around Sirius's waist as he fed Fawkes with the other.

"Go get some sleep," Sirius said when Fawkes finished eating and collapsed contentedly on the table. "I'll feed him the next time."

"What about you?" Harry looked him up and down in concern; Sirius was still pale and rather shaky.

"Not sleepy. A year of dreaming will do that to you, I reckon. Besides, I'm feeling a little peckish myself. Fawkes and I can raid the pantry together in an hour or two."

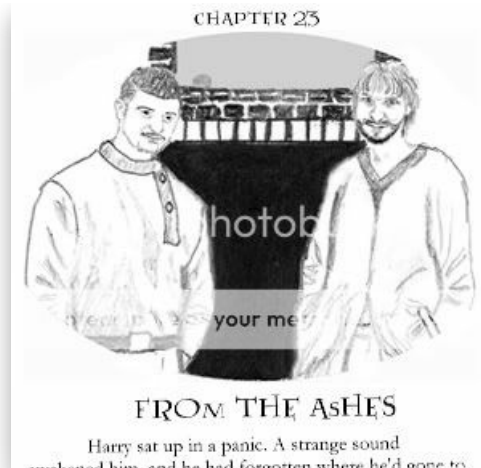
Warmth radiated from the center of Harry's chest. He was tired to the bone, and yet he would have gladly stayed awake to tend to Fawkes. Knowing that he could trust Sirius to do this flooded Harry with happiness. He stood and pulled his godfather brusquely to his chest. "Sirius. I'm so glad you're back."

## 23: From The Ashes

*Chapter 23 of 50*

Several visitors call on Grimmauld Place, one of whom is most unexpected.

Harry sat up in a panic. A strange sound awakened him, and he had forgotten where he'd gone to sleep. He blinked at the bright midmorning sunlight and realized that the screams were merely Lady Black lamenting that the wrong prodigal son had returned.



He dressed quickly, anxious to check up on Fawkes right away. As he pulled on his socks, there was a little coughing sound from the wall by the window. Phineas Nigellus Black was staring down from his portrait, tight-lipped and stern. "What's your problem?" Harry thought irritably, but he returned the gaze with one brow raised quizzically.

Phineas Black cleared his throat, then said stiffly, "I understand that you restored my rightful heir."

Harry snorted. "I helped bring Sirius back, yes. Fawkes deserves the real credit, though." He tied his shoes and jumped up.

"Potter!" belted the portrait. Harry, his hand already on the doorknob, halted and turned around, but did not speak.

The figure in the portrait moved closer, until his face nearly filled the frame. Harry's jaw softened when he realized the former Headmaster's eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

"Thank you," said Black, very quietly and simply, then he turned and rushed from the frame.

Harry knew the old Slytherin would rather eat turpentine than say such a thing to him. "My pleasure," he answered softly to no one in particular, then padded quietly down the stairs.

He found Fawkes in the kitchen, being fussed over by a crew of adoring witches. They were taking turns feeding him sliced oranges. His plumage was filling in nicely, in part because the ladies were preening him, breaking open the quills with their fingernails and gently unfurling the vanes. Roosting on the table with his eyes half-closed, Fawkes was the very image of bliss. He greeted Harry with a cheery trill, followed by a wide yawn.

Sirius sat alone at the far end of the table. Grinning, Harry slid into a chair beside him and jerked his thumb at the spectacle.

Sirius winked cheerfully. "Typical, isn't it? Two good-looking, eligible blokes right here, but are they peeling grapes for us? Oh, no. They're too busy with Mr. Soft and Feathery." He sniffed in mock disdain and shook his head.

"That's because you're too easy. They don't get many chances to play with Fawkes."

Sirius stared at him for an instant, then laughed. "Good grief, Harry, you're as bad as Reem!" Harry laid a hand warmly on his shoulder and got up to make some toast.

After breakfast, they found Lupin and Arthur Weasley in the drawing room upstairs. "Ah, Sirius!" said Mr. Weasley. "We were just talking about you." He scooted his chair away from Lupin to make room for the two of them to sit and join the discussion.

"Good things, I hope," said Sirius as he settled heavily into an armchair. Lupin and Mr. Weasley exchanged a pointed glance.

"Well, maybe," said Mr. Weasley. "We've been thinking about how to announce your return."

Sirius raised his brows. "I have a feeling this isn't going to involve ballrooms and champagne."

Lupin averted his gaze and shook his head but Mr. Weasley smiled briefly. "Maybe someday, Sirius. Merlin knows you deserve a hero's welcome. But the war's not over, and I think we ought to keep a tactical edge."

"A tactical edge," Sirius said dubiously. "Meaning...?"

Lupin raised his head. "Only the Order knows you're back, Sirius, and really, only a small part of it. The rest of the world, including the enemy, thinks you're dead."

Understanding gleamed in Sirius's eyes. "That makes me a secret weapon, doesn't it?"

Lupin smiled broadly, though the cheer was tempered by a predatory hardness around his eyes. "Exactly," he said.

"An unexpected ally, that's for sure," said Mr. Weasley reasonably. "The fact is, Sirius, the general public has never learned the truth about your situation. The Ministry, even under Scrimgeour, wasn't eager to admit it was a mistake to send you to Azkaban. I can even sympathize with that to some extent. We need every ounce of trust we can get. Plus, Peter Pettigrew still hasn't been seen in public, and many people simply won't be persuaded that he's alive until they see him for themselves. Without physical proof, there will be accusations that it's all just another elaborate tale, and the last thing we need now is yet another argument to distract people."

Sirius frowned, but nodded. "I'm sure the Ministry has a closet full of those already, but you're right. An appearance by Pettigrew would go a long way toward proving my innocence to the more stubborn louts out there."

Mr. Weasley sighed with relief. "Internally, though, when you were killed, the Aurors were told the whole story. So the manhunt is off and you have a bit more freedom to move about, though you'd still need a disguise. But you wouldn't have to worry about being shot on sight by MLE."

"Sure, they'd have to haul me in first, to see who's running around impersonating Sirius Black," he smirked.

"Which is exactly what the Aurors will tell the Prophet if you're recognized," Mr. Weasley continued. "I'm more worried about you being spotted by Death Eaters, actually. They know about Snuffles; the Ministry still hasn't caught onto that."

"So basically, I'm under house arrest *again*," Sirius said, his voice suddenly downcast.

"Hey! It's not so bad!" said Lupin, scooting forward to the edge of his chair and putting his hands on Sirius's shoulders. "Really, there are days when I wish I could find a

moment's peace around here!" He gave Sirius a gentle shake. "It won't be just you, me, and Buckbeak anymore. The House of Black has become... a house of hope."

Sirius and Lupin stared at each other with such intensity that both Harry and Mr. Weasley looked away self-consciously. In the periphery, Harry saw Sirius clasp Lupin by the forearms, then they settled back into their chairs. They both looked a bit misty, and Harry suddenly felt choked up as well.

Sirius rubbed his eyes. "Well, that settles that," he said, clearing his throat. "Can I still have Buckbeak here?"

Mr. Weasley left for the Ministry soon afterward. Harry, Sirius, and Lupin talked in the drawing room the rest of the morning, interrupted only by a Brazilian witch who brought up a lunch tray. A contingent from South America had brought in a huge spread of their native foods, each attempting to outdo the others in flavor and splendor. Fawkes had squawked in protest when Harry picked him up and removed him from the buffet. He'd actually made a lovely centerpiece for all the exotic food, but leaving Fawkes in the company of strangers for so long was giving Harry the jitters.

They had barely finished their dessert of *alfajores* when Mad-Eye Moody poked his head in the drawing room, his face unreadable. "On your feet, Potter. Need to see something outside," he said.

Harry furrowed his brow. "What?" he asked, though he could tell from Moody's pinched expression that there would be no answer; he would have to go look for himself. The old Auror had already headed back to the ground floor.

Harry glanced at the others. Lupin was staring at the spot where Moody had appeared as though he could, via sheer willpower, force him to return and explain himself, while Sirius just made a funny face and shrugged. "He's got the ultimate poker face," Sirius said lightly. "With those scars of his, you can't tell if he's deadly serious or having you on. Either way, I'm curious now." Harry and Lupin both nodded silently. Harry settled the sleeping Fawkes into his armchair and all three followed Moody down the stairs.

By the time they reached the entry hall, they heard a muffled commotion. Someone was shouting in the street outside. Moody raised the brow over his intact eye and jerked his thumb toward the front door. "Recognize it yet?" he asked.

Within half a second, Harry's stomach clenched uncomfortably and Moody's flat expression became a grimace. Harry glanced again at Sirius, whose eyes widened in recognition, then closed as he lowered and shook his head. Only Lupin continued to look puzzled, and finally raised his hands questioningly at the others. "Okay, fellows, I'm obviously not in on this one; who is it?"

Harry and Sirius spoke at the same time. "Petunia."

Lupin regarded them as if they'd just announced that Voldemort himself was standing on the lawn. "Harry's aunt? That's impossible! She doesn't know the Secret--how could she find this place?"

"You'd think so, an' yet there she is," Moody noted gruffly. "Only she's going to have all the neighbors out in the street if we don't put a stop to that noise. Let her in?"

Sirius was already pushing his way to the front door. "We'd better. If she draws a big enough crowd, this location could leak out, Unplottable or no." He flung the front door wide and stepped out onto the worn stone landing. "Petunia Evans!" he shouted. "Have you gone spare?"

Harry spotted her through the doorway, standing on the street in the midday sun and looking around frantically. He had a sinking feeling that she was searching for him, but then he realized that her gaze was not focused; she obviously couldn't see the magically concealed House of Black. A terrified expression passed over her at the sound of Sirius's voice. To her credit, she stood her ground, though all color left her face.

"Suh-suh-Sirius Black?" she croaked.

"So much for secrecy! *Concessere Petunia!*" Sirius snarled quietly. Harry recognized the incantation--it would reveal the hidden dwelling to the specified person--but Petunia continued to gaze blankly in the direction of Sirius's voice. Irritated, Sirius rolled his eyes and stepped off the porch, but her expression did not change.

Harry thought that perhaps the house had become confused regarding its true owner, and uttered the same spell with a flourish of his wand. Instantly Aunt Petunia gasped and stumbled backward. Sirius was but five steps away from her by then; he must have popped out of thin air from her point of view.

"What on Earth is the matter with--" Sirius began, but Petunia cut him off with a frightened but firm squeal.

"Where is my nephew?"

Wincing, Harry stepped onto the landing. "I'm here, Aunt Petunia." It felt incredibly awkward just to say her name, and Harry suddenly wished with all his heart that he could just throw on his Invisibility Cloak and sneak off.

Petunia looked only slightly relieved to see him. She pointed at Sirius. "You said you inherited this place. Is this a ghost, then, Harry?" she asked, again holding up with unexpected temerity despite the fear in her voice.

Both Harry and Sirius sighed awkwardly. "No, I'm not a ghost," said Sirius, his tone conveying that he expected this same question to pop up frequently in his future, and that he would be annoyed by it every time. "Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated," he added with a smirk.

Petunia didn't seem particularly happy about that news, but at least she turned back to her normal pasty shade of pale and started up the walk. Sirius crimped his face in distaste after she passed, then followed.

By the time she reached the steps, she was trembling so hard that her teeth were chattering. She stopped short on the landing to stare at the silver door knocker shaped like a serpent. The thing stuck out its tongue out with an insolent leer, and Petunia crashed backwards into Sirius as though she'd been launched from a slingshot. "Knock it off, knocker," Sirius growled with a menacing glare. The snake turned its head disdainfully, but froze into place like an obedient piece of hardware.

Petunia had gone colorless again, and though Harry had wished many times for an opportunity to confront his relatives on his own magical turf, he felt sorry for his aunt. She didn't look well. Scrawny to begin with, she'd managed to lose even more weight and was now downright skeletal. Even her hair seemed thinner, and certainly more gray. "Tell you what," Harry began, gently edging his way past her and down the steps, "if you're here to see me, Aunt Petunia, why don't we just talk out here in the garden?"

Petunia's eyes remained fixed on the silvery serpent, even as Sirius propped her back up onto the landing, but she answered Harry with a weak nod. Glances passed among all the others as Harry put his hand on Petunia's elbow and directed her toward a stone bench just beyond the corner of the house. Sirius and Lupin went back inside, but Moody parked himself stonily on the top step and took out his hip flask. Though he faced the street, Harry was certain his magical eye was roving like the beacon of a lighthouse.

As they approached, Harry surreptitiously poked his wand at the bench and performed a nonverbal revealing charm, but found no evidence of enchantment. He sat down first, nonetheless, concerned that the bench might react negatively to the pressure of a Muggle rump. Aunt Petunia's lip curled ever so slightly at his apparent lapse of manners. Harry swallowed the irritation that soured his mouth and said simply, "Just making sure it wouldn't run off or buck." He patted the bench to indicate it was safe for her to sit, gloating inwardly at the alarmed comprehension in her eyes.

Now came the tricky part. Aunt Petunia was busy struggling to sit down without actually touching the bench, so it was obviously up to Harry to initiate the conversation, but he had no idea what to say. Commenting on the weather was ridiculous under the circumstances, and polite inquiries about Uncle Vernon or Dudley would sound phony and staged. He didn't *want* his aunt to talk about them, or anything else for that matter, but he couldn't quite bring himself to ask point-blank why she had made a Herculean



effort to find him in the Wizard world.

Aunt Petunia finally accepted that the bench was not an immediate threat and let out an anxious sigh. "Well, Harry," she said awkwardly, "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

"Um, yeah," he mumbled, feeling his ears warm up and turn red.

She folded her hands in her lap and turned so that her knees, pressed tight together at the hem of her skirt, pointed toward him. Her voice took on a hint of its usual carping timbre. "I've been looking for you for some time, young man. I went all the way up to that school of yours, then they told me you were absent--without permission, nonetheless." She glared at him reproachfully, as if it were any business of *hers* whether or not he cut classes. "I spoke to your Headmistress. She knew where you were, but she couldn't tell *me* or anyone else, because she wasn't the Secret-keeper." Petunia scowled. "I knew what that meant. The Fidelius Charm! I'm surprised anyone still uses that rubbish, after what happened to my sister."

Harry was glad he'd seated himself securely on the bench, because hearing his aunt spout Wizard words as casually as she would recite a grocery list was enough to knock him off his feet. His astonishment must have showed in his face, as Aunt Petunia stopped for a brief snicker.

"Oh, yes, I know about those things, Harry. Your mother got all the magical powers, but I wasn't about to be utterly left behind! She left her old books at home when she back to school every fall. I read them all, just in case I turned out to be magical, too. It never happened, though; no, I was just ordinary. Plain, common Petunia, not lovely, magical Lily, not destined to strike fear into Dark Lords with a wave of my wand." She paused, her lip curling into something between a sneer and a desperate effort to hold back a wave of grief. "No, I was born to a plain, common life, with a plain, common husband and a plain, common son. Until *you* came along."

Harry had been watching a small beetle make its way through the sparse grass at the foot of the bench, but he looked up indignantly at that remark. "Excuse me? 'Came along?' It's not as though I had any say in the matter. Do you think that's what I would have chosen, if I ever had a choice?"

Petunia closed her eyes and took a deep, noisy breath through her nose, then let it out slowly. She had clearly put some effort into calming herself down, and Harry found that rather disarming. It almost felt like a gesture of respect from his aunt, like she had listened to him and considered his feelings on the matter. The novelty of being treated like a human being by *anyone* from the Dursley household was enough to silence him.

"I got a bit distracted, young man. These past few months have not been easy for me, and my temper... I only have a few nerves left, and it doesn't take much to get on them." Her tone was chilly, but the simple fact that she had *explained* herself made Harry feel a strange lightness all over his skin.

He needed no Legilimency to see that his aunt had *changed*, profoundly, since he saw her last. "What happened, Aunt Petunia?"

She sighed again and for a moment Harry feared she would start crying, but she merely drew her shawl a little more tightly about her shoulders. "Very well. I suppose the beginning is the best place to start," she said. This time Petunia stared at the beetle scurrying along the ground while Harry watched her.

"No one saw fit to notify us about... what happened on Privet Drive. We came back from Marge's estate to find a heap of cinders where our home used to be. Vernon insisted that you'd done it deliberately. He made quite the scene, ranting on the burnt-up lawn about you and your "black magic." The neighbors were simply captivated. One of them even had the presence of mind to run along home and get his video equipment!"

Harry shifted uncomfortably on the stone bench. Had he been watching from afar, Harry would have assumed she was kvetching with a neighbor about the latest aphid repellent, loud teenagers, or (at worst) a "strong" chicken she'd purchased at the Safeway. He began to wonder if Sirius had a point after all; perhaps she'd finally gone completely round the bend.

"But the BBC was only the beginning!" she continued. "Your uncle certainly had his fifteen minutes of fame. The stockholders at Grunnings weren't pleased at all to see their plant director in the *Daily Mail*, going on about 'vengeful wizards' and 'evil curses.' Next thing you know, they served his notice. We promptly had no home AND no income.

"Then it came time for Dudley's school to start. Far be it from Vernon to send in the tuition to Smeltings in advance--oh, no, mustn't part with a penny before it's necessary. Never mind that you can pay in installments if you begin early. Not Vernon; he'd rather wait until the very last minute and pay the lump sum. Except without his last two paychecks, we didn't *have* the lump sum in the bank. And after Vernon's spectacle in the press, Smeltings leaped at the chance to dismiss Dudley from their esteemed school."

Petunia snorted loudly, startling Harry enough to make him jump. "Marge was letting us stay at her estate as we got back on our feet, but when she learned that Dudley wouldn't be going off to school after all, she sent us packing. A bit cold, but acceptable, I thought, for I was expecting a check from our insurers any day. That's when I learned that Vernon had under-insured the house--to save on premiums, you know. Once again demonstrating his *brilliance* at finances.

"With the miserable payout, even after we sold the land, we hadn't enough to buy a new home--especially with Vernon out of work. And since he couldn't seem to stop ranting about magic and witchcraft, no one would hire him. I had to arrange to lease a flat; Vernon kept frightening the landlords at every place we looked into!"

The beetle disappeared into a clump of grass, and Petunia looked up at Harry with a rueful grimace. "Then things turned around," she said, her tone so sarcastic that an unwelcome picture of Professor Snape formed in Harry's mind. "Your uncle finally found his calling, Harry--his true niche. Just guess what he's doing. See if you can guess."

Dazed, Harry shook his head, and Petunia sniffed in disdain. "Just as well, you'd never get it. Your uncle Vernon," she continued after a dramatic pause, "has taken to evangelical preaching."

That was all Harry could take sitting up. Groaning, he slid from the bench to the ground, resting his elbows against his knees and burying his face in his hands. After a few seconds, he took off his glasses and set them aside, in order to submerge his head even further. The image of his uncle in a cheap canvas tent, standing on a tree stump or old crate and bellowing about hellfire and brimstone, made him feel like crawling under a rock for the second time in two days.

Petunia sat quietly for a few minutes, then continued. "Needless to say, Harry, I've had a lot of opportunity for reflection over the past few months. I can say with authority that it's a lot easier to come to terms with witchcraft and magic being real, than to accept that one's husband is an idiot and one's son is not much better."

Harry's head shot up to stare at his aunt.

"It's quite true," she said with remarkable calm. "I'm sure you expected me to scream and rant that this was all your fault, that you'd ruined our lives, our home. And no doubt to demand part of your inheritance." She paused, cocking her head thoughtfully. "Funny about Black not being dead; I suppose you haven't a penny to your name once again. Ultimately no better off than the rest of us," she noted.

"Well, as I was saying, had I found you two months ago, I might have done all of those things, yes. Vernon may rile up his 'flock' regarding the evils of magic and 'the devil's work,' but he's not too *principled* to turn down any Wizard gold! He sent me off with all his blessings to hunt you down for the purpose of making him a comfortably wealthy man again." Petunia's face soured into a bitter sneer. "But I came home early during one of his 'revivals' while I was looking for Hogwarts. I stood just outside the tent and listened to him rave to whomever would listen that *my sister* was evil..."

Petunia's voice tapered off to a whisper and cracked into silence. For Harry, it was like a third eye had opened right in the middle of his forehead. He immediately saw the truth of Petunia's story on open display like a Turkish bazaar. Her sudden burst of outrage that sweet, gentle Lily was being vilified by a man who was too greedy to make sure his own son's tuition was paid. Her recognition that Vernon was nothing more than a *bully*; that from the very beginning he'd been attracted not to *her*, but to her

shyness, to her *embarrassment* that her sister was some sort of "freak" and had to be hidden away from the rest of the world. He took that vague, unformed anxiety and sculpted it into a wall around her, making her his personal pet, a trinket he kept boxed up for his own selfish amusement.

Petunia had played along for years without even realizing the game was on. She'd helped pour Dudley into his father's mold, catering to his every whim until he, too, took it for granted that he could, *would* have his way at all times, for there simply *was no other way* in his perceptions. She'd never seen her life for what it was until it collapsed like one of Ron's houses of cards while she stood outside that tent and watched her son pass the hat while her husband railed against the gentlest, sweetest person Petunia had ever known.

Harry rested his head against the bench; the thick layer of moss gave it an agreeable cushion. "There *is* great evil in magic, but not in all of it," he said bluntly. "Just like anything else. Dark wizards destroyed your house in minutes with their hatred--but my mother's magic had kept it all at bay for sixteen straight years."

Petunia nodded but said nothing.

"Why *have* you come here, Aunt Petunia?" Harry knew he could simply lift the answer from her mind, but he wanted to hear it spoken aloud.

She straightened up primly and picked up her handbag, fingering the plastic clasp for some time before replying. "I'm leaving, Harry," she said quietly. "I'm not sure where, but I've taken a third of the money that's left and I'm leaving. There's no stopping Vernon. Not only does he fancy himself quite the martyr, but I think he rather enjoys being the center of attention in his makeshift pulpits. As for Dudley..." Her face clouded, but she steeled herself and continued. "Dudley likes attention, too, as well as not having to set the alarm or attend classes. The endless summer holiday is making up for the loss of all his gadgets--for the time being. But when the novelty wears off... Somehow I suspect that by Dudley's eighteenth birthday, he'll have enough of wandering the countryside with his father."

She looked so despondent that Harry felt he must say something. "I could... try to look in on them now and again," he mumbled, knowing full well that he might as well offer to fly to the moon.

Petunia stared at him a moment, then laughed, but without mockery or contempt. "Probably best not to, Harry, or you might be burnt at the stake, or worse. Vernon's gone Pentecostal--taken to snake-handling, you know. He might hurl the whole basket of them right into your face."

"That's okay, I can... talk to snakes." Harry suddenly felt utterly absurd, casually discussing his talent for Parseltongue with *Aunt Petunia*, something he didn't even tell other *sorcerers*, for Merlin's sake! Her lip curled with mild revulsion, and Harry shrugged. "Not that I make a habit of it or anything! It's just... come in handy a few times."

Petunia's dubious look suggested that she could think of more worthwhile skills to possess, but she nodded half-heartedly. "I suppose it's, erm, much easier than having to run and fetch a rake when you find one in the garden."

After a brief, incredulous stare, Harry laughed so hard that he snorted.

His aunt, having managed a few stiff but sincere chuckles of her own, finally opened her purse and peered carefully inside. She closed it again but did not fasten it, and edged forward on the bench. "I sought you because I have something to give you before I leave, Harry. She leaned down and spoke in a low voice, despite the fact that there was no one to overhear. "I don't know what customs you... people have, so if this is considered distasteful, I beg your pardon."

She sat back up and gazed at the rooftop of the Muggle tenement on the other side of Grimmauld Place. "When my sister died, there was of course an inquiry. The police suspected some sort of explosion, perhaps a faulty gas line--wanted to make sure the public was safe, you know. They cleared out the wreckage to investigate the matter. Most of their possessions were lost, but a few things turned up here and there."

Petunia reached into her purse. "I chanced to be in Godric's Hollow on some matter or another--I believe I was hunting for a legal record of your birth--when these were found by one of the detectives." Giggling nervously, she pulled out two thin wooden rods, one dark, one light, each one easily twice the length of her small handbag. "I never get over the way they squeeze themselves in there." Harry's full attention focused on the objects in her hand.

"The young man asked if James and Lily were musically inclined. He thought these were conductor's batons. I told him that was exactly what they were and took them, with every intent of throwing them into the nearest bin. But I couldn't. I tried, you understand, I simply *couldn't*. Every time I picked them up, there would be an interruption--the telephone would ring, or one of you babies would cry--and I'd attend to it without realizing that I'd set the wands down instead of throwing them in the bin. I'd discover them months or even years later, on some high shelf or seldom-used drawer, and I'd even recall *putting* them there, though I certainly hadn't meant to at the time."

Harry's hand was steady as he reached for the wands, despite the fact that his heart was racing and he felt somewhat lightheaded. He took them from her one at a time, first the slender, delicate willow rod that had been his mother's, then the sturdy mahogany wand of his father. He expected some sort of reaction, a rush of magical energy or at the very least, a tingling, but there was none. But it warmed his heart deeply to hold each one of them, and after deciding that a more dramatic effect was not likely, he took both wands in one hand and pressed them against his cheek.

"Thank you," he finally said.

"I'm glad this wasn't for naught. I spent weeks trying to find Hogwarts, you know--I'd only been there once before, when we all went up to see Lily off to school. And then to find you weren't there, and Dumbledore had passed on... Lily and James both thought the world of him. I didn't realize things were quite so grim."

Petunia snapped the clasp on her purse. "Fortunately, Lily had told our mum how to find your godfather, and Mum told me. I came here once before, you know, soon after you were left with us. I'd hoped to... well, to persuade your godfather to take you off our hands." She shuddered; Harry knew that a meeting between Petunia and Sirius's parents could not possibly have gone well. "I remembered that you'd inherited the place, and when you weren't at Hogwarts, I thought it was worth a try. And you were here, and now you have the wands, and my errand is done, although I admit a bit of curiosity about Sirius Black no longer being dead."

Harry flattened his lips and frowned. "It's kind of a long story. It turned out he wasn't dead, just... trapped in time. And dreams." This sounded pretty thin, even to Harry's own ears, but Petunia simply grimaced and raised her hand.

"On second thought, I'm quite sure I'd rather not know." She rose a bit stiffly from the concrete bench, and Harry leapt to his feet.

"Would you like to... come in for tea, or..."

Petunia glared down her nose reproachfully, but there was a tiny hint of warmth there as well. "Got to be on my way, Harry," she said primly. "This was my last obligation; it's time for a fresh start. I believe I'll go to Greece. Always wanted to see the ruins and what not. I trust you won't send Vernon on my trail."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Not likely. Though he'll probably accuse me of sacrificing you in some black magic ritual."

Petunia laughed outright, a strained sound like a suppressed sneeze. She was clearly out of practice. "Oh, lovely! Do play along with that, Harry, if it should come up. That will make my return all the more dramatic." With that, she patted his arm and walked resolutely to the street, even giving Moody a brief nod as she passed the steps.

Harry accompanied her to the magical barrier that hid the house from Muggle eyes, and gazed after her as she stepped into the street. She never looked back. When she reached the end of Grimmauld Place, he sighed and went back inside.

The bit of melancholy that Harry felt as he watched his aunt depart disappeared at the sight of Remus, Sirius, and even Tonks, each hastily retracting a set of Extendable Ears. Harry didn't need to say a word; their guilty looks and placating grins told him all he needed to know. "You people are pathetic," he noted, then laughed. If any of them had been outside chatting with Petunia Dursley, he would have done the same thing, and everyone knew it.

Sirius and Lupin both stared at the wands he was holding. Harry hefted them a bit, as though confirming they were real and solid. He studied them intently for a moment, biting his lip, then took his mother's wand in his left hand. Holding his father's wand by the tip, he extended the handle toward his godfather.

"Harry..." Sirius's voice strained into a whisper.

"You lost your wand," Harry said softly. Gaping, Sirius shook his head. Harry rolled his eyes and jiggled the wand, though there was no question that his godfather had noticed it. "Go on. Take it."

"I can't take that from you, Harry--"

"You're not taking it! I'm giving it." He jabbed the wand further toward Sirius. "Come on. My dad would want you to have it."

Sirius reached hesitantly for the wand, but pulled Harry into a fierce hug instead of taking it. "I can't... I don't know what to say Harry!" Easing his grip, he finally took the wand by the handle, raising it with reverent admiration. He clasped Harry to his chest once more. "Thank you," he murmured as he withdrew.

Harry managed half a smile. It hurt to give the wand away, even to Sirius, but it also felt right. There was too much good magic left in those wands for them to sit unused in his trunk.

He and Sirius departed to the courtyard to put the wand through its paces. Harry remembered all too well the rather unreliable behavior of Ron's borrowed wand, though that was certainly not helped by the Spellotape holding it together. "I had to borrow Moony's wand now and then," mused Sirius, "but I don't think I've ever used James's." He tapped it against his palm warily, but there was no burst of sparks or other indication that the wand was affronted to be in his hand.

"Try something simple first," said Harry needlessly.

Sirius scrunched his brows together in a petulant glare before smirking and pointing the wand at a chrysanthemum bush. "*Accio* flowers!" he said assuredly.

Nothing happened. "Hmph," Sirius grunted, giving his shoulders a little shake. He pointed the wand at a yellow beech leaf and tried again. "*Accio* leaf!"

Both wizards frowned. Sirius offered Harry the wand; he took it and pointed it. Wordlessly, he Summoned the leaf in an instant. Sirius blinked. "Now, no need to rub it in," he said cheerfully, but there was no mistaking his disappointment.

"Why didn't it work for you?"

"Oh, Merlin only knows," sighed Sirius. "Most wands go dormant when their owners die. That's why they don't get handed down. I always wondered if that was built in, you know--to keep the wandmakers in business and all that." He grinned cynically. "I suppose you have enough of James in you to reach the magic. It was a nice try, though, Harry. Thank you."

"Maybe my mum's?" Harry said, fishing the willow wand out of his robe.

Shrugging, Sirius accepted it and gave it an experimental flick. "No sparks," he said glumly. "I tried to make some that time." He pointed at the mum again. "*Accio* flowers." He sighed aloud when they remained stubbornly motionless.

"I'm sorry, Sirius." Harry really meant it. "I guess you'll have to buy a new one after all. With Ollivander's closed, though, that'll be tough. Maybe Tura can help you get one from America--it sounds like they've barely heard of you in Northpole."

Sirius looked askance at him, his sincere smile restored. "Where? You mean Northport? Morgan le Fay, Harry, you sound like a Muggle jet-jetter, talking of shopping in America like it's an everyday thing."

"Jet-*setter*," Harry corrected wryly.

They spent the next few hours basking in the afternoon sun as Harry recounted his tales of becoming a Legilimagus. Sirius remembered Ondossi from the time she had Flooed him, and was not thrilled to learn that she was Harry's tutor. "I don't like her, Harry. She's ruthless, and she's spooky. Dumbledore, rest his soul, never even met her--at least, not as far as I know." Harry nodded, recalling that Ondossi had said as much. "He always trusted people far more than they deserved," Sirius concluded bitterly.

Harry conscientiously stared at a bumblebee buzzing around the chrysanthemum. "She seems all right to me."

"Well, just be careful. I'm sure it's good to have a mentor--it does sound like this magic you've got is tricky business. But I don't like her reaching into your mind and taking hold of you. Sounds like possession to me, and that's as bad as the Unforgivables. If not worse!"

Harry bristled. "She only did that once, when we first met. She didn't trust *me* either, you know--she was afraid I might give over to Voldemort and then she'd have to take me on."

Sirius tossed his head with a snort of disdain. "As if you'd ever... Why, if she's so good at Legilimency, how could she even suspect such a thing? There's not a drop of Darkness in you, Harry."

Though it was a compliment, it felt inexplicably like an insult. Harry's shoulders tightened, and he frowned at his godfather. "You think? I'm a Parselmouth, with Voldemort's mark upon my forehead, but no Dark magic?"

Sirius dropped his jaw, then gripped Harry's arms as though to shake him. "That's right!" he said angrily. "He may have passed those things to you, but he didn't make you Dark! I know it!"

Harry was taken aback, and blinked at the older man for a moment. "What do you mean, 'you know it'?"

Sirius clenched his teeth. "Nothing. I just do. And if this Tura could really, really see, she'd know it, too." With that he folded his arms and leaned back against the trunk of an elm tree, obviously intending to say no more.

Harry gritted his teeth as well, then sighed. Two days ago he didn't know if Sirius was still alive, and now they were *arguing*! This was not what he wanted at all. "Sirius, look. I know you and Tura got off to a bad start. But you have to give her a chance. She's taught me so much. She helps me. She kept me from making a terrible mistake, one that would've got me killed." He shivered, reliving that moment of stunned horror when he realized how close he'd come to luring his friends off to certain death.

Spurred by the intense emotion, Harry's thoughts shifted to the hillside in Godric's Hollow: her small, warm hand on his knee; their hands entwined; the brief illusion that she was drawing him close in the cool quiet of the night. At the time, he'd been too surprised to think and react. Now, however, the memory made his breath hitch in his chest.

Harry forced the thought out of his mind with such vehemence that it was practically Occlumency. He looked up at Sirius, who had been staring determinedly at the ground just beyond his shoes during Harry's reminiscence. He felt a flood of relief that his godfather had not seen the look that surely crossed his face.

Tonks suddenly appeared out of nowhere, in all her colorful glory. "Where's the funeral, you two?" she demanded playfully, planting a noisy smooch on Sirius's cheek, then another just like it on Harry's. The two wizards regarded one another uneasily, but quickly relaxed. Both found it hard to remain grumpy when bearing a ruby lipstick kiss.

She held her hand out to Harry and pulled him to his feet. "Come on, luv, vacation's over. Your bodyguard's just arrived." She offered a hand to Sirius. "And *you* ought to get some sleep," she chided.

"I'm still not tired," Sirius grumbled, but he got to his feet.

"You know," began Harry, "I don't have class until Monday. Maybe I could--"

Tonks was already shaking her head. "Not a chance," she said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand. "Remus wants you back at Hogwarts. He's still a bit peeved about you running off. Doesn't want you enjoying a weekend in London after all your mischief, you know." Both Harry and Sirius rolled their eyes, which she observed with a scowl. "And don't give me that mutinous look!" she chided. "You're supposed to be studying, and you--" she pointed to Sirius, "--need to get your strength back." She pulled open the heavy door and held it for them to enter.

"Drawing room," Tonks said quietly, and they stole past the sleeping portraits and up the stairs. Harry's palms began to sweat with trepidation; he knew nothing about this new guardian, and visions of Percy Weasley suddenly leaped to mind. The idea of having some snooty old killjoy shadowing him and keeping him on leash was unpleasant, to say the least. *I've got to stop messing with Remus*, he noted glumly.

Lupin smiled warmly, however, when they entered the drawing room, and Harry recognized the man standing beside the fireplace.

"Ve meet again, Harry," said Viktor Krum.

Remus Lupin collapsed onto the settee before the fire in the drawing room. He spotted the tiny box on the mantel. He had not forgotten that it was there, but all the miraculous chaos of the preceding twenty-four hours had forced him to set it aside, both physically and mentally.

He'd been up most of the night talking with Sirius. It was surprisingly difficult to accept his friend's return, after spending more than a year coming to terms with his death. So many times he'd wished Sirius alive again, or that he had fallen in Sirius's stead, but such wishes weren't supposed to come true. His emotions had run the entire gamut from disbelief to exhilaration, from joy to guilt. *If it hadn't been for that lost Time, my best friend would have starved to death while I sat out here feeling sorry for myself.* I did all that I could; only Fawkes had enough magic to pull him out of there. *I'm going to wake up any moment and find this is all a dream* Bless you, Harry Potter, and your unwavering faith.

Lupin had spent most of the morning tracking down Viktor Krum, who had been in Eastern Europe, helping to resettle the last of the Giants from that part of the continent. Lupin had been loathe to pull him from the field, but Krum's assignment was nearly complete. Keeping up with Harry was no mean feat, and the ideal bodyguard stayed a step or two ahead; if anyone could outpace Harry, it would be the former Champion of Durmstrang and a fellow Seeker. More importantly, Harry respected Krum. He wouldn't be likely to sneak off behind his back.

Lupin grinned wryly, remembering the brief instant he'd considered assigning Sirius as Harry's guard. *How I even gave that a moment's thought, I'll never know* Sirius had grown so much since the days of the Marauders, but Harry brought out his devilish impulses in full. He chuckled softly to himself. *Hogwarts probably couldn't take a whole year of those lunatics together.*

He let his head fall back against the settee and closed his eyes. Harry was safe, and it was quite clear that his Bond with Fawkes was deepening. Were it not for the fact that the phoenix could only repel one deadly curse at a time, Harry probably wouldn't need a guardian. He was gaining good control over his magic, too; Ondossi was an odd sort, but Harry obviously benefitted from her teaching.

With a deep breath, Lupin forced himself to loosen his shoulders. The Order was hunting for the Horcruxes. Harry was growing into a very formidable sorcerer. Arthur Weasley would soon steer the resources of the Ministry against Voldemort in a meaningful way. And now Sirius was back, a powerful wizard and a trusted friend.

For the first time, Remus Lupin thought he might actually survive being the leader of the Order of the Phoenix.

Lupin leaped up from the settee and sent off his Patronus, a duck-billed platypus, with a decisive slash of his wand. He waited at the doorway, ushering Tonks inside when she responded to the signal. She barely cleared the door before he Charmed it closed over his shoulder; he was determined to act before he lost his nerve or his palms got damp.

Lupin dropped to one knee, wordlessly Summoning the box from the mantel. "Adora Tonks, will you marry me?" he blurted.

She leaned back for a moment, rolling her head from side to side with a stunned expression. Lupin bit his lip and opened the box. The spring had re-stiffened overnight, and it snapped open so sharply that the ring was launched from the velvet lining. He lunged and caught it before it hit the floor, wriggling back to his upright position even though he suddenly felt quite ridiculous.

Tonks's smile had never looked more lovely. "Oh, Remus. I thought you'd never ask."

## 24: Ends and Beginnings

### Chapter 24 of 50

Returning to Hogwarts with his tail between his legs, Harry learns some distressing news about Sirius. Mr. Weasley assumes his elected position.

The return to Hogwarts was far from quiet. Harry and Krum Apparated outside the front gates and walked the main path to the castle. It should have been easy to slip in unnoticed, but Colin Creevey happened to be studying on the lawn at that moment, and his shriek of excitement turned every head on the grounds. By the time they made it to the Entry Hall, it seemed that the entire school had their eyes on the AWOL Chosen One and the idolized Quidditch player--and their tongues wagging in whispered speculations about their presence.



Harry glanced at Viktor, amazed by his ability to appear unfazed by this attention. "Doesn't it ever bother you?" he murmured quietly, his mouth barely moving as he formed the words.

"Always," said Krum succinctly, his face as impassive as ever.

They climbed the marble stairs to the Gryffindor common room. Seeing that neither Ron nor Hermione were about, Harry headed straight up the spiral stairs to the dorms, Krum quietly shadowing him a few steps behind. *I wonder where he's supposed to sleep?* Harry mused.

"Hey, Harry," Ron mumbled with a wan smile when Harry burst into the dormitory. He was sitting in a rumpled heap on his bed reading the Charms textbook, and looked as though he'd had the wind beaten from his sails recently. When Krum followed and closed the door, however, Ron's eyes bulged. "Viktor." He glanced between them a few times. "The bodyguard?" he asked, addressing neither of them in particular.

Harry nodded. What more needed to be said? He flopped onto his bed, then eyed Viktor uncertainly. Unruffled, Krum strolled to the window and sat on the sill, putting his feet up on Neville's trunk and looking perfectly bored.

Ron closed his textbook. "Looks like you're pretty well tethered, eh? Both of you," he corrected. "At least you can move a bit. McGonagall put me and Hermione under house arrest. We're stuck in our rooms for everything except classes for a week. Even meals--the house elves bring us a tray. She's got them *carrying it* all the way up the stairs, too, so it's cold once it gets here." Ron brightened slightly. "I reckon Hermione has a fit every time."

Harry hung his head. "I'm sorry, Ron." He really meant it, too; he would much rather have had McGonagall take out her wrath on him.

Ron smiled warmly. "Ah, forget it! We got Sirius back, and we had a wild time doing it. I swear, I wish we'd had more danger than we did--they might have felt sorry for us and lightened up a bit on the punishment side!"

Krum snorted, then immediately reset his features into their typical cool mask. "Sorry," he said with a little wave.

A breathless first-year arrived shortly to summon Krum to the Headmistress's office. He said nothing upon his return, other than, "I haff my orders." McGonagall never called for Harry. She must have known that the silent treatment was much worse than simply punishing him. He spent the weekend in self-imposed exile with Ron, and the house-elf not-so-subtly brought food for three at every meal.

On Monday morning, Harry and Ron slunk down to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom at the last minute, arriving just as the bell rang. Ondossi gave Harry a murderous glare as he came in, and her angry words popped into his mind: *You were supposed to assist me yesterday.* He stopped in his tracks and smacked his forehead; he'd forgotten all about his volunteer duties. Ondossi taught Remedial Defense to the locals in Hogsmeade on Sunday mornings--he could have gone into town for a few hours.

Receiving funny looks from several people (including Ron), Harry collected himself and took his seat. Krum was only a few steps behind, and when he entered, there was a fresh round of gasping and whispering. Harry nearly smacked his forehead again, having become accustomed to his bodyguard's presence in his room. *Of course* Viktor's appearance would cause a whole new uproar.

Ondossi frowned as she looked for the source of the disruption. She spotted Krum leaning against the wall by the door, where he apparently planned to lurk during class. She stared at him in surprise, then looked him up and down with an intensity that Harry found strangely unsettling in the pit of his stomach.

"*Alo, kraciv,*" she said, in a throaty, rolling manner quite different from the guttural bark she used when speaking Inupiaq. Viktor raised his brows for an instant, but responded only with a sharp nod and a brusque, "Professor."

She stared at him a moment longer with a hard smile, then turned to address the class. "Apparently you all know this gentleman," she observed, drumming her fingers loudly on the podium. "I believe this class is about to get even more interesting."

Harry nudged Ron with a grin, but one look at Hermione and he sat up straight and faced the blackboard. She could poach eggs with that scowl.

When they paired off to practice the lesson, Hermione grabbed Harry's arm with a pinch to rival a giant crab and hauled him to the furthest corner of the room. "Will you look at them?" she snarled, tossing her head toward Ondossi and Krum, who were huddled in the front corner in a quiet discussion. "Who does she think she is?"

Harry, who had braced himself for the full force of Hermione's wrath at being banished to her room for a week, was at a loss for words. "Who... what?" he finally squeaked.

That was obviously not the correct response. Hermione gave him a new glare that could wilt a steel rod. "Don't you dare cover for her, Harry Potter! I saw her look him over--she's up there *flirting* with Viktor!"

Too stunned to speak at first, Harry just gaped, which did nothing to soothe Hermione's temper. "No!" he finally said, quietly but firmly. "She's just..."

"Being friendly?" Hermione interrupted, then scoffed. "Please. Since when does she get chummy with strangers?"

Suspicion began to nip at Harry as though he'd stumbled into an anthill. He watched them intently until he caught Viktor's eye; it was brief, but sufficient. He felt a puff of pride at his progress in skimming thoughts, then turned triumphantly to Hermione. "She's just asking him what Dark magic he learned at Durmstrang."

Jealousy quickly turned to outrage. "She what? Viktor doesn't know any--"

Harry put a finger to his lips and shook his head. "Yes he does, Hermione," he whispered, surprised at his own certainty. "He doesn't use it, but he was taught. They all were."

Hermione stared at him, her mouth popping open and shut as the ideas she was processing attempted to spill out and were forced back down. Harry suddenly felt sorry for

her. "Come on, Hermione," he said gently. "Moody showed all of *us* the Unforgivables... that is, Crouch did, as Moody. That doesn't make us Dark wizards. Viktor's all right."

She fell silent, lost in thought. Harry raised his head with another tingle of self-congratulations at his success at averting this latest crisis; Hermione had forgotten all about Ondossi for the moment. But then he spotted Ron standing midway along the wall with his back pressed tight against it, peering bitterly back and forth between Viktor and Hermione.

Harry hunched in defeat. *I've **really** got to stop messing with Remus.*

The week crawled by at a snail's pace, cooped up in their rooms during the last few pleasant days of autumn. Dark clouds began to gather on Saturday afternoon, the last day of their banishment, and sure enough, a terrific storm struck that night. All the crisp fall leaves were blown into dank corners and turned to slime, and the temperature went from pleasantly brisk to downright cold. Thus when Harry finally regained the freedom to leave Gryffindor Tower, it was just the sort of day one preferred to stay in bed under the covers.

He found Viktor in the common room, wearing an obviously toasty overcoat of brown wool with fur trim. Harry gulped; his own coat would come up to his elbows--if he could get it all the way over his shoulders. It was going to be a chilly walk.

Ondossi was waiting for them in the cloudy gloom outside the oak doors, wearing an even toastier-looking leather parka with a huge hood. "Morning!" she said cheerfully, her breath turning to steam in the damp air, then she did a bit of a double take. "You gonna be warm enough like that, Harry?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm fine. Let's get moving."

His fingers were white from the cold by the time they reached the Three Broomsticks, but Madam Rosemerta met them with mugs of hot butterbeer. He wrapped his hands around his mug and gritted his teeth at the sting of the thaw, but by the time the townspeople had taken their seats, he was ready to duel.

Ondossi had squirreled Viktor off to the back room, so there was no awed muttering about the famous Seeker--yet. "We have a guest today," she began, addressing the class. "He's going to add a whole new level of realism to our lessons. He'll be using a modified wand so that his spells won't be powerful enough to cause lasting damage, but they're going to be the real thing. Not just hexes and jinxes, but true Dark magic."

The room went silent, and Tura peered intently at each student in turn. "Some of you think I'm joking. I'm not. Most of you are afraid. That's good. If you ever face a Dark enemy, you'll be afraid, possibly overwhelmed by fear. Today you'll practice doing what you must do, even when you're too scared to think. POTTER!"

Harry jumped at her sudden shout, resulting in nervous twittering throughout the classroom. His wand was already in his hand, though he'd been holding the butterbeer only a second earlier.

Ondossi grinned wryly and pointed at him with her thumb. "Did you all catch that? Bonus for not even spilling your drink, Potter." She paused for the laughter to die down. "Reflexes. His reaction to the unexpected was not to turn and look, not to duck, not to wince, run, hide, put up his fists... all a huge waste of time when faced with a magical threat. No. He had his wand ready in an instant. Automatically. Which means that even though he was just standing there casually enjoying a hot drink, he knew at some level *exactly* where his wand was--and how to get it in a hurry. That's half the battle, right there: being ready when the moment comes. Well! Let's see what happens in the moment, then." She clapped her hands and stepped back against the bar, making room for Harry and Viktor to duel.

When Krum stepped out from his hiding place, Harry had to cover his face to hide his snort of laughter. Viktor had a paper bag on his head, undoubtedly to conceal his identity from any Quidditch fans in the class, and to make him appear more like a masked Death Eater. The bag had come from the Eyelops Owl Emporium, however, and the eye holes were cut out right in the middle of their logo, a fat owl delivering a rolled-up parchment with an enormous smile. Viktor's eyes, peering out from an upside-down owl's face, utterly ruined the effect Ondossi was obviously shooting for.

That is, until Krum flicked his wand and shot a bolt of purple light at Harry. "*Protego!*" Harry shouted, barely deflecting the spell.

"Nicely done--both of you," said Ondossi. She turned back to the class. "Your *Ministry*--" she spat the word, as usual "--advised all of you to 'be aware' of emergency measures like the Shield Charm. However, I'd be surprised if half of you can cast it. Hand me your wand, Mr. Potter."

Harry's stomach lurched, but he obeyed. He had no idea what would happen next, but he was pretty sure it was going to hurt.

Ondossi nodded at Krum, who flicked his wand again and launched another purple bolt. This time it hit Harry square on, knocking him flat on his back. The spell did more than that, however. From the ground, Harry saw a copy of himself stagger from the blow, clutching at his chest. Blood suddenly splattered all over the floor before this other Harry, but just as the class began to scream, the image went still, flickered, and disappeared.

Ondossi pulled him to his feet. "Line up, people," she ordered the class. "Mr. Potter, if you'll assist with the actual casting, I'll set up the preliminaries." She smiled at Krum. "Mr. Bad Guy? Ready?"

Two hours and dozens of sore bottoms later, nearly all of the locals could produce a basic Shield Charm, and when Ondossi dismissed the class, they hobbled out of the Three Broomsticks with an air of pride. When the room had cleared, however, Krum yanked the bag from his head to reveal an uncharacteristic scowl. "Dat was unpleasant," he said.

Ondossi nodded. "I know." She shrugged and patted Viktor warmly on the shoulder. "Thank you, though. It really helped them." She wrapped a black cloth over her eyes and left without another word.

Krum seemed to take it all in stride, as usual. "Tell me, vat is up vith her eyes, Harry?" he said.

Viktor hadn't really spoken much since he'd come to Hogwarts. Harry smirked and took a seat at one of the tables, beckoning Krum to join him. He caught Rosemerta's eye; she immediately drew two more tall glasses of butterbeer. It was time to catch up a bit.

When they finally returned to the Gryffindor common room, Hermione jumped up and hustled them right back out through the portrait hole. "For Merlin's sake, Viktor, can't *you* even keep him out of trouble?"

"What?" said Harry defensively. "We were helping Ondossi--"

"Which ended an hour ago! Professor McGonagall sent for you right after class. Honestly, Harry! As if a week in your rooms wasn't enough."

"Well, at least I wasn't alone this time," he noted weakly.

Remus Lupin was sitting by himself in the Headmistress's office, balancing an empty teacup and saucer on his knee and drumming his fingers on the armrest of his chair. He glowered at Harry, who cringed, then at Viktor, who didn't. "I assume there was a delay after Ondossi's class," he said, looking as though he didn't believe that for one second, but he didn't want to waste time going through the excuses. "Harry, there's something we need to discuss. Mr. Krum, if you could wait outside..."

That was startling. Harry glanced at Viktor. "No, it's all right. Let's just hear it."

Lupin frowned a bit, but closed the door with a flick of his wand. "Very well; I suppose you'll be talking about it with the others later anyway." He paused a moment, then resumed speaking in a gentler tone. "There's been some... developments, Harry. With Sirius."

Harry's skin tingled all over as he broke out in goosebumps. "What developments?"

Lupin bit his lip briefly. "He's all right, mostly, Harry. We're not sure what they mean. For one thing, he can't sleep. He hasn't so much as catnapped since he returned. It doesn't seem to bother him; he's not tired at all. We're all hoping he's just been immersed in dreams for so long that he's full up on sleep for the moment."

Harry was holding his breath. Remus didn't come all the way to Hogwarts to tell him Sirius was having insomnia. He fought the urge to simply sweep the real issue from Lupin's thoughts.

"There's more, though. Again, no one knows how or why, or if it's just a temporary thing, but... Harry, Sirius can't seem to do any magic."

Harry had to sputter a moment before any words would come. "What?"

"I know, Harry. We can't believe it either. Twelve years in Azkaban couldn't break him..." Lupin's voice broke, and he closed his eyes to compose himself. "No, no, we don't know that *anything's* broken. None of us have ever seen anything like this. People do lose their magic, but usually they're wounded or starving... *something* debilitating. Then as often as not, they've just given up using their magic because they've lost all hope--but they still *have* magic.

"Sirius, though... He's been happier this week than I've seen him in years! Flirting with girls at dinner, going over strategies; it was like the last fifteen years hadn't happened! But then he borrowed my wand to straighten up his old bedroom, and he couldn't do it. He couldn't even levitate a sock. It doesn't make any *sense!*" Lupin smacked the arm of his chair with his fist.

He immediately looked sheepish, and brought his voice back down to a civilized tone. "We've only got one Healer in the Order. She hasn't been able to come see him yet. And it's not like Sirius can just drop in at St. Mungo's!"

"He can if that's the only choice!" Harry burst angrily. "He's not a criminal, Remus; it was fine to keep him hidden for the sake of the Order, but if he needs a Healer, the secret's over! It's not worth it!"

"Calm down, Harry! I told you, our Healer will see him, she's just been busy. Voldemort's been stirring up trouble in Hong Kong, where she lives, and she hasn't been able to get away. That was in part why I came here; I'm trying to decide if we should get Poppy Pomfrey involved."

"Yes! Why not?" demanded Harry.

"Because I'm not sure she knows the whole story, Harry. She's seen Snuffles in the past with you and Dumbledore, and she *might* know who he really is, but I'm just not sure! Plus it's bad enough that half the Order knows he's back--if we're going to keep mum about this, we have to start *somewhere!*"

Harry sat back, silent. This whole "secret weapon" idea was looking more misguided all the time.

Once again, Lupin lowered his voice. "Besides, I know for certain Madam Pomfrey's never seen a case like this here at Hogwarts. Loss of magic is the sort of thing only a top-level Healer would address. But believe me, Harry, it's killing me to sit around and wait as well. That's why I'm considering this." He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"This explains why he couldn't use my dad's wand," said Harry, gazing out the window at the roiling clouds. "He can't do anything? Even Apparate?"

Lupin shook his head sadly. "We've tried everything, Harry. He can't even morph into a dog. He never needed a wand for that."

All three wizards sat pondering this heavy news for a moment, then Lupin spoke up again. "Obviously, we hope it's only temporary. Like the sleep problem. Perhaps they'll go hand-in-hand. Or the Healer will have some ideas. But Harry, in the meantime... Sirius isn't taking this very well. He was so happy when he first got back, but now he's... not. And to make it worse, he can't sleep, so he sits all night by himself, thinking about it."

Harry winced as though his scar had suddenly heated up, and Lupin's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, Harry! I probably shouldn't have mentioned anything, but--"

"No," said Harry. "I'm glad you told me. You know how much I hate being left out." He managed a quirky grin, and Lupin returned it. "But what should I do?"

"I don't know, Harry. I have a feeling he's going to try to avoid you--he doesn't want to be seen like this. He didn't even want me to tell you, but *I* reminded *him* how you hate being left out. Just... just talk to him, when you can. I don't want to see him shrink back into himself like he used to. When he was alone too much."

Harry nodded, remembering how bitter his godfather became, cooped up in that gloomy, Dark house.

Lupin rose and gave Harry a hand up. "I've got to get back to Headquarters; it's tomorrow in the Pacific Ocean already, and I have a meeting in the Philippines. They've made a potion from some jellyfish or eel, which seems to confer some immunity to the Cruciatus. Or so they say. It's worth looking into."

The three of them descended the moving staircase. Harry stopped Lupin at the bottom. "You know, before you go back, maybe you could go down and visit Hagrid," he said. "I bet Buckbeak would love an invitation to go home."

Harry-and-Viktor, Ron, and Hermione spent the next week in the library, hoping to find, if not a cure for Sirius, at least an ~~ae~~*explanation* of what had happened to him. Unfortunately, there was not a single report mentioning the Veiled Archway in the Healing section of the library. Either no one had ever come out of it alive, or the Ministry had kept such news under lock and key.

They asked Neville to check his Herbology texts for plants that affected dreams or restored magic, crossing their fingers that he wouldn't piece together what they were up to. They questioned Professor Flitwick about unusual sleeping charms, on the pretext that stress was making Hermione sit up late into the night. Harry even paid a call on Professor Slughorn, hoping he might have a helpful potion, but he had to be even more cautious about the details he gave to the nosy professor. In the end, it was impossible to ask for what he needed without raising suspicion, so he took a last chunk of crystalized pineapple and left.

Hermione seemed to take it as a personal insult that she couldn't find anything to help Sirius. "I wonder how long they've kept that thing down in the Department of Mysteries?" she grumbled one evening. "I've never even noticed a reference to it, not in any book I've ever read. It might as well not even exist, for all that's known about it!"

Ron peered up from an obscure Muggle text about alleged magical artifacts, something he'd pilfered from his father's bookshelf at the Ministry. "Well, it's not like they call it the Department of Everyday Household Items, is it?"

She scowled. "Obviously. But they might have a filing cabinet full of cases like Si--Snuffles, for all we know, and yet we're stuck reinventing the wheel out here."

Ron shrugged dismissively. "Eh, the thing's obviously dangerous; I'm glad they have it under lock and key, myself."

"Lock and key is one thing, Ron. They keep the Time-Turners under lock and key, too, so that people don't go around rewriting history. But they still let people know about them, and use them!"

"And they keep the Prophecies locked up and DON'T let people use them. Which I'd say is a good thing, considering what You-Know-Who would have done if he could have just checked out that one about Harry like a library book."

Harry was watching a couple of third-years struggle with a copy of *The Monster Book of Monsters* in order to ignore the bickering, but that last bit caught his attention. "I wonder if they have the latest one about me?" he said.

Hermione looked up from the argument. "I'd imagine so. Why not?" she said.

Harry shrugged. "It's not like it was made in private--Trelawney shouted it for the whole school to hear. Do you suppose they'd tuck it away in a little globe anyway?"

"Does seem a bit wasteful," Ron agreed.

"Wasteful would be putting in all the little nuggets she comes up with during class," noted Hermione, shaking her head in distaste. She sat up abruptly and looked at him. "You know, Harry, it just occurred to me--I think it already came true!"

"Really?" said Harry skeptically. "This I have to hear."

"No, seriously, Harry. She would rise up from ashes and mud--isn't that what your Aunt Petunia did? Returned from her burnt-up house? And she had a gift for you, 'at long last': the wands! You said she'd wanted to just throw them away over the years. That sounds like something she was 'loathe to give'." Hermione sat back in her chair with a smug grin, clearly pleased with her interpretation.

"But there's also that part about answering with my own blood," Harry reminded her.

Her smile became a frown in an instant. "That's true. I wonder, then... You wanted to give a wand to Siri--Snuffles, right? Perhaps this prophecy is actually saying that your blood needs to be spilled in order to restore Snuffles' magic." As soon as she finished speaking, Hermione's jaw fell in alarm.

Ron made a wry face, but gazed wide-eyed at Harry. "You know, mate, I think she's onto something. I mean, it's a bit silly for Trelawney just to prophesize that your aunt would bring you those wands back! And didn't she say that the gift was *'his'* due? As in, someone else's besides yours?"

Harry groaned. They were right; he hadn't thought about it before. The boon was meant for someone else, not himself; if it had been meant for Harry, it would have said "the boon that is YOUR due." "Oh, bugger," said Harry, recalling the night he was bound to the tombstone in the Hangleton cemetery. "I'm in for another bloodletting, then. I'll be lucky to have a drop to my name before this is over."

On the day Arthur Weasley was sworn in as Minister of Magic, all of the seventh-years were allowed to attend the ceremony. They Apparated as a group from the Hogwarts gates to the Ministry atrium. It had been polished up for the affair, but still seemed gloomy and dull. Harry's thoughts turned immediately to the cave under the cliffs where Slytherin's locket had once been hidden. Perhaps the Inferi created some sort of lingering magical aura, a trace of their misery from being reanimated and abused.

The swearing-in was held in the Wizengamot chamber, obviously in anticipation of a crowd of onlookers. The terraced rows of seats were far from filled, though, and the ceremony itself was short and terse, as though all present simply wanted to get it over with and disband before any Dark forces could attack. Harry watched from the back with a cynical eye, trying not to look at the prisoner's chair in the center of the room, chains still attached to its arms and legs. *You'd think they could have taken that out for the occasion*, he mused, but on second thought, perhaps they were worried that Mr. Weasley might come to his senses and run away. The chair would be handy if they had to chain him down and force him to take the office.

At the close of the ceremony, an enormous red banner suddenly popped into existence with a loud bang, proclaiming "Way to Go, Da!" in huge gold letters. The view was especially clear, since most of the bystanders dropped in terror at the noise. Harry was not among the crowd sprawled on the floor; he would have been more surprised if Fred and George *hadn't* done something spectacular. The *Prophet* photographers immediately began snapping pictures for the front page, ensuring that Weasley's Wizard Wheezes would go up another notch in the esteem of pranksters everywhere.

The Order held a little celebration in Mr. Weasley's honor afterward, since no one in the Ministry was brave enough to host a congratulatory affair. At his first opportunity, Harry scampered to the top floor bedroom and knocked. He refused to take silence for an answer, but he dared not pound too loudly, even with the noise of the party to cover the sound. Sirius finally gave up and let him in, just as his knuckles were turning pink.

"I hope you were sleeping," said Harry, a bit grouchy at being snubbed for so long.

Sirius snorted. "I should be so lucky. Mother of Merlin, Harry, I thought time moved slowly in Azkaban. I had no idea how long a week really is."

Harry bowed to Buckbeak and sat down on the end of Sirius's bed. "Has the Healer found anything yet?"

Another snort. "Nothing. She gave me a double-shot of Draught of the Living Dead, and I didn't even yawn. And I'm still not tired, just bored. When I think of all those times in school when I'd drop off in my chair in the common room with a half-finished roll of parchment, then scramble the next morning to get it done before class... Ah, Harry, if I could bottle this stuff and sell it, I'd be a rich man."

"You *are* a rich man."

Sirius's face twisted up far beyond sneering. "Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting. Must be all that wild carousing."

Harry sighed. At least Sirius was talkative. Cheerful really was too much to hope for. He reached into the pocket of his robes. "Exploding Snap?"

"Ah, go on, Harry. You should be down there celebrating." Sirius tipped his head at the bedroom door and the sounds of the party.

Harry made a raspberry sound. "I'd rather be up here playing cards with you than shmoozing with that lot. Even with the free mead!"

A real smile, one that reached the eyes, finally spread over Sirius's face. He reached over and cut the deck.

Presently there was another knock. "The man of the hour!" said Sirius, when Arthur Weasley's head poked around the door. "Congratulations, Mr. Minister of Magic!"

Mr. Weasley closed the door behind him, grinning bashfully. "Yes, yes, yes," he said with a dismissive wave. "All this fuss is like an Engorgement Charm on my ego. Molly swears I've gone up three hat sizes this week." Even in the gloom of Lady Black's old bedroom, his eyes sparkled cheerfully.

Sirius shook his hand, blinking in surprise when Mr. Weasley pulled the chair from the dressing table and sat. "In for a hand or two, then?" he asked.

Mr. Weasley smiled wearily. "You know, I *would* rather be up here playing cards, but sadly, parties are now a duty I can't avoid. But I do want to talk a bit." Harry started to get up, intending to give them some privacy, but Mr. Weasley raised his hand. "To both of you."

Harry and Sirius exchanged a curious glance, their game forgotten.

"I've been thinking a bit more about your re-introduction. Been getting a few lessons in Advanced Politics, you know, from Fleur. I have a lot to learn, it seems." Mr. Weasley's smile faltered, as though a bug had suddenly flown up his nose, but he continued gamely. "Anyway, her family has quite a bit of experience with the press."

"As I said before, some of the Ministry, particularly MLE, knows the truth about you, Sirius. There were all sorts of rumors regarding who was present that night in the Department of Mysteries, but since you had *disappeared* before the crowds started arriving, your name didn't come up too often in the press. Most of the confessions in the Wizengamot were kept out of the *Prophet*, too, but again, your name came up now and again."

"Fudge had promised that there would be an official inquiry into the matter, after he was forced to tell the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement that they'd been chasing down an innocent man for three years. But he put it off, and then Scrimgeour took over--and he found the whole fiasco embarrassing, to say the least. In the end, he brushed it under the carpet, too."



Mr. Weasley sat up straight in his chair with a fresh twinkle. "I think it's time for that inquiry, Sirius. We need to establish that you were fighting beside Harry that night, as a member of the Order. We have plenty of witnesses, plus testimony from the trials--from our side and theirs. All we need is for the press to cover the investigation, and the evidence will speak for itself. And I--that is, Fleur already has several reporters curious about the story."

Sirius looked skeptical. "And just how'd she manage that? The *Prophet's* always hated me."

"She called it 'bait and sweetch.'" I think she originally invited them to interview her about 'the plight of the modern Veela' or some such, then mentioned your name at a few key times. She's really quite good at working the press, and life certainly is easier when it's on *your* side."

Having received both support and scorn from the *Prophet*, Harry heartily agreed.

"Once people hear that you were fighting for our side in the Ministry, they'll naturally wonder why--you're supposed to be this cold-blooded murderer, after all. That's when the formal inquiry will really kick in. They'll go back and re-open your case, this time without prejudice. There may even be a new trial, since you were sentenced without due process the first time."

"And with the head of the Order and the Boy who Lived both testifying they've seen Peter Pettigrew alive, minus one finger, who would question my innocence?" said Sirius, nodding animatedly. "Merlin's beard on toast, Arthur, this could work!"

Mr. Weasley smiled broadly. "It's an art form, managing the press, and I thank the stars that I've got Fleur around to do it. Worse than putting your head in a dragon's mouth, as far as I'm concerned. But the Delacours are famous socialites in France; they've been honing their technique for generations."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Reminds me of the Malfoys."

Mr. Weasley grimaced, but acquiesced. "They both appear on the gossip pages, it's true, but the similarities stop there. A scandalous article about the Delacours typically involves eating salad with the shrimp fork." He peeked back up with a guilty expression. "I didn't just say that."

Sirius laughed. "Arthur, you sound like a Minister already!" But instead of chuckling at his little jest, his godfather suddenly frowned and slumped against the headboard of the bed. "So, once the wizard world is ready to embrace me again, who's going to tell them I'm a Squib?"

"Stop it," said Harry.

"You're not a Squib," chided Mr. Weasley at the same time. "And I'm still not sure I want the world to know you're alive yet, just that you aren't a criminal. I have faith, Sirius, that you're going to recover from whatever it is that's inhibiting your magic, and I want to keep you as my ace-in-the-hole." He reached over and flipped the top card on the deck; it was the Archchancellor, the top trump in the game. Normally such a play would cause the opponent's cards to explode, but since Mr. Weasley wasn't technically dealt in at the time, the deck apparently became confused. Both Harry's and Sirius's piles of cards went off like packets of firecrackers.

"Brilliant, that!" said Mr. Weasley. "Couldn't have gone better if I'd planned it, could it?"

## 25: The Inquest

Chapter 25 of 50

Harry takes Ondossi to her first Quidditch match. She doesn't get it. The initial investigation into Sirius Black's loyalties reveals a number of unexpected findings.



The entire Wizard world braced itself for Halloween, anticipating that Lord Voldemort would commit some new atrocity to mark the occasion. Parents found excuses to come visit their children at Hogwarts, some scurrying them away in anticipation of a fierce attack on the castle, others crashing the annual Halloween Feast, believing themselves safer there than anywhere else. Harry could barely sit still through the meal, anxiously expecting his scar to erupt with pain at any minute, but they all made it through dessert without so much as a bump in the night.

Harry slouched beside the common room fire, still eyeing the window anxiously. "Forget it, mate," said Ron. "He's doing this on purpose. Everybody expected a big stunt this year; they've been debating it in the *Prophet* for weeks now. He probably just got bored with the idea--it'd be awfully trite to pull a surprise attack when everyone in their right mind's expecting it."

Hermione giggled. "I think Ron's spot on, Harry. And how often does THAT happen?" She ducked as Ron quickly Transfigured a quill into a bamboo dart and launched it

wordlessly at her forehead. "He's probably sulking in his lair right now."

Harry eyed both of them dubiously, then turned to Krum. "What about you?"

His bodyguard leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table thoughtfully. "I think he will not attack tonight, Harry, but not for these reasons." All three looked up at him in surprise, and he continued. "He plays games with you, Harry. On this night you killed him that first time. To attack tonight is to... what is the word, to admit something he tries to hide..."

"Acknowledge?" said Hermione.

Krum nodded. "Da. That would 'acknowledge' your victory over him. He doesn't want to give you satisfaction, you see?"

"Wants me to think he forgot our anniversary?" said Harry, nodding with approval.

"Exactly."

Ron grinned with all the mischief of his Wheezy brothers. "You know, Harry, it's a shame you couldn't send him a card."

The first Quidditch match of the season, Ravenclaw vs. Hufflepuff, took place the next morning. There was a huge turnout for the game with all the visiting parents, and it had a wonderfully festive atmosphere after all the grim anticipation the night before. Neither team, however, seemed to be at their best. The combination of a huge feast with a restless and anxious night had dulled their reflexes a bit. Fortunately, no one seemed to care. It was a great day to be alive and enjoying a bit of sport.

Except for Ondossi. Harry had coaxed her to watch the game, but she was outspokenly unimpressed. "My one day to sleep in and here comes 500 people tromping into my bedroom," she grumbled. "Not to mention that bug thingy. You know that one with the broken wing? It came by this morning again. They must've let it out when they were warming up. It landed on my nose. I thought it was a mosquito and smacked it so hard I broke the other wing."

She pulled the unfortunate Snitch from a pocket of her leather parka. It flapped pathetically in the palm of her hand, making an odd grinding sound. "Can't we, you know, put it out of its misery or something?"

"It's not alive, Tura," he said, trying to watch the game and make note of the various players' strengths and weaknesses.

She snorted. "Maybe not, but it sure knows how to lay on a guilt trip." She held it up in the sunlight and began fidgeting with the wing, trying to snap the joint back together correctly.

When both Seekers turned and launched their brooms straight at them, Harry realized what she was doing. For a few horrified seconds, he watched the Hufflepuff Seeker growing larger and larger without seeming to move at all--sort of the reverse of the night he'd watched himself fall off his broom through Fawkes's point of view.

Ron, sitting beside him, reacted first, probably because as Keeper, he was much more used to dodging projectiles. "DUCK!" he yelled, diving between the rows of seats and yanking on Harry's robes. Harry followed suit, first cuffing Ondossi's wrist to knock the Snitch loose, then dragging her down with him.

Amidst the screams of their neighbors in the stands, he heard the buzz of the Seeker's brooms as they rapidly skimmed through the space where their faces had been a microsecond earlier. The broken Snitch bounced to the floor in front of them and rolled itself frantically under the seats, where it lay shivering.

He pulled Ondossi up by the hood of her parka and glared at her. She shrugged. "What? I could've handled them," was all she said.

The following week, a big barn owl brought Harry a roll of parchment bearing an officious-looking Ministry seal. He opened it right there at the breakfast table, quite curious for a change what the Ministry would want with him. With Arthur Weasley in charge, it might actually be worth reading.

November 6, 1997

Dear Mr. Potter,

You are hereby requested to appear in person at the Office of Internal Affairs of the Ministry of Magic, for the purpose of providing testimony regarding the matter of one Sirius Black.

Your deposition is scheduled for 1:00 PM, Tuesday November 11, 1997. Please arrive promptly and be prepared for a lengthy interview. Your cooperation is both necessary and expected.

Sincerely,

Percy I. Weasley

Internal Affairs Inquisitor

Harry had to read it twice more before deciding *he* wasn't in trouble this time. He spotted Ron and Hermione sitting back-to-back at opposing tables near the door and showed them the letter. "Can you believe it?" he said. "Your dad put Percy in charge of the investigation about Sirius!"

Hermione, who only required one read-through, answered right away. "Absolutely! Can you think of anyone more likely to beat each individual detail to death and beyond? You can bet his report will be unimpeachably thorough when it's done--and what's more, he's very conservative. Percy would hate to report that the Ministry made a mistake, and everyone knows it; he'll do whatever he can to find proof that Sirius is guilty."

Harry and Ron sneered defensively, but Hermione wouldn't have any of it. "No, that's a *good* thing! Because he won't--he *can't*, since Sirius isn't guilty. But everyone knows he'll *try*. And when even Percy Weasley is forced to conclude that Sirius was innocent, no one would dare question his findings. His dad's the Minister; it would be political suicide to challenge Percy on something like that!"

Ron crossed his eyes as though Hermione had begun speaking a foreign language. "Oh, like they care about Dad. They only voted him in because the position's too dangerous for their taste!"

"Ah, but they *voted him in*. He's going to be Minister for a very long time. Even his enemies know they'd better agree with his agenda or they might just find themselves unemployed." Hermione's grin widened with glorious vindication.

Ron shook his head again. "You know, Hermione, you scare me sometimes. I'm beginning to think you *like* all that backstabby stuff."

Harry-and-Viktor reported to the Ministry precisely as ordered. They were ushered from the Atrium to the top level of the Ministry. Only two of the lobby elevators even went to Level One, and required a password to activate the button for that floor. Harry learned this the hard way, as he received a nasty Stinging Hex when he pressed the button on his own.

The Atrium guard, who had obviously seen many people make that mistake, smirked a bit as he stepped in the car and waited for the doors to close. "Convection oven!" he announced, then pressed the Level One button himself. Harry glared, but didn't ask why the guard hadn't warned him. It had to be pretty boring, sitting at that desk all day.

The elevator doors opened onto a wide, carpeted foyer with enormous paintings on the walls, all of whom looked very stuffy and self-important. Most of them ignored the visitors, but some peered down their noses as though inspecting meat of questionable quality. "Students," one of them muttered in disdain, whereupon all of the portraits turned to show their profiles. Harry and Krum were clearly too insignificant for such important people to notice.

Across the foyer was an ornate reception desk, manned by a very severe-looking witch with her hair pulled back so tightly into a bun that her eyebrows were pulled up, giving her a look of perpetual surprise. "We're here to see Percy Weasley," said Harry awkwardly, when the witch simply ignored them as they stood before her desk.

She finally looked up, staring at their name badges for a long, silent moment before taking out a clipboard from a drawer. "Mr. Potter... you're on the list. Mr. Krum is not. He'll have to return to the Atrium."

Harry raised his brows at Viktor, who shrugged. "I am his bodyguard," said Viktor. "How will you guarantee his safety?"

The reception witch smiled coldly. "There are no security concerns in this department."

"You think so?" said Viktor, reaching into the front of his robe and withdrawing a wand--the "modified" one he used in Ondossi's class. "For some reason, I am not so confident as you." He pointed it right between her eyes.

It was all so bizarre, Harry thought for a moment that he must be dreaming. He reached for Krum's arm, but the other wizard tossed him a furious glance that froze Harry in place. "What are you doing?" he finally hissed.

"I will not let you continue without me, Harry. You," he said curtly to the reception witch. "Do whatever you must to get my name on list."

Only a hint of additional surprise showed on her face, and it seemed as though things were about to get very ugly. She stared at Viktor for a long, taut moment, then pulled one of the knobs on a panel beside her desk. Into a pneumatic tube, she said, "Mr. Weasley, your one o'clock is here with a private security detail. Will you authorize an additional visitor?"

A tinny version of Percy's voice issued from the tube. "Private security? That's not necessary."

"As I told him, Mr. Weasley. Will you authorize the visitor?"

"Um, sure, all right. Send them back, please, Medusa."

She tipped her head toward an arched entryway to the left of her desk. "Room 107," she said icily, then began shuffling papers on her desk as though the two of them had already gone about their business.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked as soon as they were out of earshot. "She could have had us thrown out, or worse!"

Viktor stuffed the wand back in his robe. "I think not. They would not dare to cross you in that manner. For Ministry to use force in public on Harry Potter would be political disaster. But you have real enemies here, Harry, and they are cowards. Stab you in back in deserted hallway. No, in here, I stay with you."

Sighing in frustration, Harry nonetheless scanned the corridor briefly. "Fine, stay. But next time, maybe we can just ask instead of whipping out a wand?"

Krum shrugged. "Is faster this way." He grinned just a tiny bit as he knocked on the door labeled, "107: Internal Affairs."

Percy Weasley promptly yanked open the door, though the expression on his face was cool and blank, as though he had much more important things to do than respond to knocking. It irritated Harry; Percy had, after all, demanded that he come here. *You'd think he could at least say a simple "Hello,"* he mused.

Once the door was closed, however, Percy spun on his heel and immediately locked it, then cast several wordless spells that made the door and surrounding wall shimmer. Krum put his hand inside his robe, obviously gripping his wand, but Harry bugged out his eyes at his bodyguard in a silent plea that he behave himself. Viktor frowned and kept his hand on the wand, but did not draw it into the open.

When Percy finished warding the door, he turned to Harry with the same impassive expression, but there was definitely a hint of... what? Fear? Anxiety? Whatever it was, it was clear that Percy's formal letter and aloof welcome were an act of some kind, covering up a matter of uncomfortable importance. Percy glanced back and forth between Harry and Krum a few times, then said, hesitantly, "Harry? Is this bodyguard... that is, can you trust him?"

"This is Viktor Krum," said Harry firmly. "He's a member of the Order. Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of him."

Percy swallowed hard, then offered a trembly hand. "My pleasure, Mr. Krum." Viktor shook his hand, but said nothing.

Rounding his desk, Percy indicated they should sit, then immediately began fiddling nervously with some paper clips on his desk. "All right. Well. Thank you for coming, Harry. And you too, Mr. Krum." He licked his lips a few times. "You obviously got my owl," he added.

This was getting old very quickly. "Yes, Percy, I got the owl," Harry said with an irate huff. "I came here to answer your questions about Sirius Black. I brought my bodyguard because Remus will hex me into next week if I even think about going anywhere without him. Now will you just spit out whatever's making you act like there's an ashwinder in your pants?"

To his chagrin, Percy gasped painfully, as if shot with an arrow. "Shh!" he hissed, then buried his head briefly in his forearms on the desk. "Forgive me, Harry. I'm not... used to this."

He had their full attention at that point. "Percy," Harry whispered, "What in Merlin's name is the matter?"

Drawing a few shaky breaths, Percy sat up again, leaning forward on his elbows. Harry and Viktor both leaned in close. "All right," he began quietly. "I need to start from the beginning."

"Father assigned me to open a formal inquiry about Sirius Black when he took office. I moved up to Level One and was told to leave no stone unturned. I was thrilled to do it, don't misunderstand; it was a terrific vote of confidence from Father in my research skills and my thoroughness. Something I've wanted the Ministry to appreciate and use to its advantage for a long time." His voice was almost back to normal, though still quiet; clearly tooting his own horn had a calming effect.

"Naturally, the first thing I did was investigate the rumors about Black's most recent sighting at the Department of Mysteries. Both the accused and the, *ahem*, Order of the Phoenix members who were present that night identified Black in the official court records. Two wizards from, ah, You-Know-Who's ranks stated under Veritaserum that Black engaged them in a magical duel and dispatched them, apparently fighting alongside the forces of the Order, though they admit he might have been acting as an independent agent."

Harry interrupted with an impatient wave. "No. He was fighting *with the Order* against the Death Eaters."

"Yes, yes, that's what the Order members said, if they were asked. I'm not debating that, Harry, I'm just trying to keep all possibilities in mind. That's what a good investigator does. Anyway, yes, the evidence indicates that whether or not Black fought with the Order, he definitely fought *against* You-Know-Who's forces."

"Now that came as a big surprise, because even though I'd heard the rumors, you realize, Harry, that I'm old enough to remember that awful day when Black killed all those people and was sent to Azkaban." Again Harry waved his hand, but this time Percy held up one index finger and pressed on. "And of course I remember all the horrible

things he did when I was Head Boy at Hogwarts--the way he shredded the poor Fat Lady's canvas, for example. It made no sense at all, that such a man would oppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, let alone side with the Order. Particularly since he fought on *your* side, here in the Ministry that night, when it was obvious he'd been trying to kill you in the past."

Harry rolled his eyes, but still Percy held up his hand in a plea for silence. "I completed my research into the official records of the incident, then I asked Profe--that is, Mr. Lupin for my first interview. He told me a *profoundly* different story than any I'd ever heard about Sirius Black. He said Sirius had never served You-Know-Who; that he'd been framed by Peter Pettigrew for those murders and sent to Azkaban without trial. I nearly tossed him out of my office, I was so upset, but as I said, a good investigator considers all the possibilities. It is my duty to collect the evidence and see which theories are supported and which are not. People lie, but evidence does not."

"Unless it's planted," Harry interjected.

Percy sighed, his shoulders sagging. "Of course, unless it's tampered with. Which is basically what Mr. Lupin was saying--that Pettigrew 'planted' his own finger as evidence that he'd been blown up along with all those Muggles, and framing Black for the crime. Lupin says that he has seen Peter Pettigrew alive as recently as 1994--and that you've even seen him since then."

"That's right, Percy. You have too, you know. Pettigrew lived with you and your whole family for years. He's--"

Percy made a slashing motion with his hands, wincing painfully. "I've heard. And I haven't forgotten Scabbers was missing a toe. Or that I couldn't seem to do any magic on him other than basic levitation and so on." He shuddered and wiped his forehead.

"Look, Harry," he said, then paused with his mouth open as though the words had become wedged in his throat. "My father has always worked at the Ministry. I grew up respecting it. I thought if Dad had only worked harder and had more ambition, he could have gone so much further than Muggle Artifacts." Harry sat back, crossing his arms over his chest with a knowing look until Percy turned away with an embarrassed grin. "Well, you know what I mean. If it weren't for the attack, Dad would still be downstairs. The point is, I thought if I threw my lot in with the right people, I could climb to the top in the traditional way."

"By stabbing everyone in the back who stood in front of you?" Harry asked, with only a tiny twinge of guilt at the harshness of his words. He'd never quite forgiven the way Percy had advised Ron that Harry was a bad influence from which he should dissociate himself.

Percy obviously hadn't forgotten either, as he lowered his eyes deferentially. "Harry, that was a mistake. I'm trying to explain. I thought I was getting involved with the right sort of people for my career. I just... I wanted to believe them. When they all said you'd gone nutters, I... You understand, I didn't *want* it to be true, Harry, but, well, you were always a bit scary, you know, going out and looking for trouble unless it found you first. And I knew Cedric Diggory, he was only a year behind me and a good bloke! When he turned up *dead*, and you alongside him talking of You-Know-Who--"

It was Harry's turn to curtly raise his hand for silence. "No need to review what happened, Percy; I was there."

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Percy in a milder tone. "I'm just trying explain why I... doubted you. No, actually, I'm explaining why I trusted my superiors in the Ministry instead of you. Because that's the long and short of it, Harry--I just wanted to keep believing that the Ministry was *good*. That even though there might be some rough patches here and there, it had honorable and lofty intentions at the core."

Harry sighed. "Percy, why have you called me here?"

"I'm getting to it!" he huffed in exasperation, then clenched his jaw briefly. "As I said, I questioned Mr. Lupin, then Mr. Moody, then Mr. Shackbolt... The more I interviewed, the more names that came up right here within the Ministry, of people who knew full well that Sirius Black was serving the Order. No one else had seen Pettigrew alive, though, so the question of Black's guilt or innocence was still unanswered in my mind. I decided I needed to interview someone from the other side."

"My position as Inquisitor gives me the freedom to conduct my investigation as I see fit. I decided to go out to Azkaban personally, rather than have the prisoners brought here. It seemed more practical... At any rate, I told no one what I was doing, because I was already feeling a bit nervous. My investigations were suggesting a vast internal cover-up, and I wasn't sure who I could trust! So I simply traveled on my own, without even a Portkey to indicate where I was going."

Percy's voice began to shake again, and he scanned around the room fearfully. "I'd never been there before, Harry, so I didn't know what to expect. I knew the Dementors were gone, and they'd been the guards, so I reckoned there would be some wizard guards now, but probably understaffed. I walked right up from the docks to the fortress without seeing a soul, but it didn't seem out of the ordinary; why guard an empty dock?"

"No one met me at the gate. I got angry that I'd made such a long trip and no one would answer the gate. So I pulled even harder on the bell rope, then kicked it, then... Well, I never thought it would really work, I thought the gate of Azkaban would have proper wards on it--but I cast the *Alohomora*."

Percy's voice had pinched off to a whisper, leaving Harry and Viktor at the edge of their chairs. "Don't tell me it opened," breathed Harry.

Percy nodded, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. "If I hadn't been so angry, I think the shock would have knocked me out. It just flew wide open, Harry, and I could see into the Keep. There wasn't a soul in the place. No guards, no prisoners. No one."

"I should have left right on the spot, but this was so incomprehensible. How could Azkaban be empty? I thought perhaps I'd landed on the wrong island. I don't even know what I was thinking, to be honest, but I went inside for a look round. I crossed the little courtyard to the tower entrance, fully expecting a guard to stop me at that point."

"I wasn't stopped. The door opened when I pulled the handle. I could see the cells inside; the tower was just an open chamber with a long slope winding its way up the walls, lined with cells. Empty cells."

Unblinking, the younger wizards sat in stunned silence until Percy continued.

"I thought if they'd broken out, I'd at least find the bodies of the guards. Nothing. No sign of struggle or rioting, no broken hinges on the cells, not so much as a turned-over cot. It looked as though someone had just rung a little bell and said, 'Class dismissed!' and everyone had left."

"That was two days ago, Harry. When I got back, I asked Shackbolt what happened in Azkaban. He had no idea what I was on about. I didn't tell him anything, but I started looking into it myself. Nothing, not so much as a single memo, has been circulated regarding Azkaban. The guards' pay has been deposited to their Gringotts accounts. Supplies have been ordered, paid for, and sent--at least according to the records. And of course, a lot of files were lost in the attack this summer. But out of all the documents I still have, there's no official record of one living soul going to the island in seven months. No visitors, no new prisoners, no change of guards."

"Someone let them all out, and they're covering it up!" said Harry, his voice choked with fury.

"Either that or they all escaped and no one has realized it yet!" said Percy breathlessly. "But even I can't bring myself to accept that. All those criminals on the loose, having just escaped out of Azkaban? Many of them went mad long ago; they'd end up wandering around on the island, unable to concentrate long enough to Apparate. As for the others, why surely after a breakout of that magnitude, at least ONE of them would have been spotted by now. I concur with you, Harry; I think they were released, either by someone within the Ministry, or with their cooperation. And the only place I can imagine all those criminals being kept hidden, fed and occupied is--"

"With Voldemort."

"Quite so," said Percy, after nearly ducking under his desk at the name.

Harry gripped the arms of his chair furiously. "And someone here has kept it quiet for seven straight months, knowing full well that the Dark Army is rebuilding. There's still a traitor in the Ministry helping Voldemort!"

"KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN!" hissed Percy. "I've sussed that out, Harry, believe me! Even my head's not that thick. I've put every Silencing and Obscuring Spell that I know on this room. Look at this!" He slid open a panel on a large cabinet behind his desk to reveal a Muggle photocopying machine. "I'm not even using magical means to assemble the records in my case--I don't want anyone to know which documents I've examined! Thank goodness for Father's obsession with eckeltricity; if it weren't for his books, I never could have made this bloody thing operate!"

Percy flopped back into his chair and rubbed his temples. "There's still more, Harry. While I was investigating ways of getting to Azkaban undetected, I thought I'd compile the records of Sirius Black's incarceration. He was sentenced without a trial, which was done from time to time when Mr. Crouch was in charge. There still would have been a summary of the evidence, the writ of sentencing, and so forth. I wanted to read any statements Black made at the time, interview the clerk who processed him, et cetera." He stopped and sipped some water from a mug on his desk.

"Nothing, Harry. Not one thing. Granted, a lot of those records were destroyed in the raid too, but Level Ten went unscathed and some parchments would have been kept in the official files of the Wizengamot. Other cases from that year were still there in the cabinets, but not a single page about Sirius Black. It was as though he never existed.

"Harry, this just *isn't* done! Sentencing a sorcerer to Azkaban involves all sorts of records. Why, just apportioning the prisoner's food rations requires paperwork in three different departments. All of it is gone--not a single sheet of parchment, not a single *signature* to indicate anyone involved with Black's imprisonment. It simply can't be an accident, Harry. Someone had to go through and systematically purge those records. To breach the wards and locks over every last parchment, they had to be very high up in the chain of command."

"That already narrows search," said Krum. "Only certain people will have enough clearance to access records. Who?"

Percy gaped at him. "You mean *when*? The files could have been purged any time in the last fifteen years. Augustus Rookwood could have done it all before he was exposed as a Death Eater. We don't know exactly when Barty Crouch, Jr. started exerting the Imperius on his father; Mr. Crouch might have been forced to destroy the records just before he was killed. Or someone might have done it all just last week, when the inquest was ordered! We just don't know!"

Harry's face hardened. "We *will* know. Today. Percy, you issue an order for every single person in this building to report for an interview, and I'll find out who's done this."

For a moment, Percy just stared, his eyes bulging. Then comprehension dawned on his face, but instead of setting to the task, he jumped up and began to pace, wringing his hands. "No! Absolutely not! You aren't listening, Harry! Whoever it is, they're *important*. They won't have to come running the minute I call! They'll tell me to wait until they finish some business, and in the meantime they'll do a bit of investigating on their own. Why, they won't even need to pin down someone who's already been interviewed--all they have to do is ask Medusa for my appointment list and they'll know you're in here. How long do you think it will take them to figure out you're doing Legilimency on everyone?"

He lunged and gripped the arms of Harry's chair imploringly, not realizing that Krum nearly hexed him across the room for the aggressive move. "You know how this is done, Harry--you've done it before. The traitor *can't* know that we suspect anything. Once he finds out, he'll disappear... or worse." He let go of Harry's chair and leaned defeatedly against the desk.

"All right, then," said Harry. "What's your plan?"

Once again, Percy sat up with a dumbfounded stare. "My plan? MY plan? I don't *have* a plan, Harry. That's why I called you here! You're the one that does this sort of thing, skirting around right under Dark wizards' noses and exposing them. Not me! I'm out of my league here, Harry; I need your help."

*It figures.* Harry slouched in his chair, interlacing his fingers in his lap. "My help," he sighed. "Percy, what exactly do you think I can do? I can't just skulk around the Ministry like I do at Hogwarts. It's one thing to sneak around the castle where I *live*, with friends to keep watch in the corridors, and secret passages and whatnot. But here? I think I'd stick out a bit!" Percy looked crushed, as though the concept that Harry couldn't simply blend in at the Ministry had never crossed his mind.

"I say we round everyone up, lock them in Courtroom Ten, and let them out one at a time for a quick bit of Legilimency. I could help you with that, Percy. But I've given up the traitor-finding business. I'm strictly a Dark Lord Eliminator now." He smirked. "Everyone needs a specialty."

Percy looked as though he might burst into tears, which was not a pleasant prospect at all. Harry stood up and patted his shoulder kindly. "There is one thing I can do, though, to help you. I do know one place I can look for information about Sirius Black's case. He's my godfather, you know. I inherited his entire estate. I'll have a look round. Lots of papers in the attic--you never know what might turn up."

The reception witch turned up her nose as they got on the elevator, but Krum had been correct. They left the building without so much as a reprimand for smuggling in a wand, though the Atrium guard gave them a black look. *Good*, thought Harry. He deserved a bit of chewing-out after letting Harry press that jinxed elevator button.

Viktor went to the customary Apparation area at the end of the Atrium, but Harry waved him over to the elevator to Muggle London. "Ve aren't taking the Metro, are ve?" asked Viktor as they rose.

"It's a bit of a walk to 'my' house," said Harry cheerfully. "And I did promise Percy I'd start on that research right away."

They arrived at Grimmauld Place after a rather smelly ride on the Underground, in which Krum flinched desperately every time the train changed its velocity and nearly dropped to the floor when another train passed them, heading the opposite direction. Harry had stared at the Quidditch star in disbelief. "I don't feel safe in trains without magic," Krum mumbled apologetically. "Mechanical things not meant to go so fast."

Apparently Krum felt confident in the security measures at Headquarters, as he followed Harry only as far as the second-floor drawing room, where he sank contentedly in the nearest chair. Harry left him there reading a *Prophet*, and found Sirius in the top floor bedroom, just as he expected.

Sirius wasn't eager to cooperate, despite Harry's explanation of Percy's inquest. "I don't want you in my head," he said bluntly. "It's been almost a month, now, Harry, and I still haven't slept. There's obviously something wrong with me. All we need is for you to catch whatever I've got by prodding around with Legilimency."

Harry sputtered. "Fine, then. We can do it the usual way--out loud. Just start from the beginning and tell me everything you remember from your sentencing!"

"That was a long time ago!" he snapped. "I'd just lost my best friend, Lily, and my godchild; I found out Wormtail had betrayed us all, and I hadn't killed him! I was half mad with grief and rage, and all I could think about was how badly I wanted to kill Peter. Besides, they had me in Azkaban within hours of my capture--most of the formalities were done after the fact."

"But they had to let you make a statement, Percy said so--"

"And I'm sure I did, and it was probably along the lines of, 'Kill Peter Pettigrew!' I'm telling you, Harry, I hadn't eaten or slept, and when Peter got away from me, it was like I snapped inside! It was months before I finally came to reason again, and I was fully buried in Azkaban by then."

He set his jaw. "I'm sorry, Harry. I can't help you. I can't help Percy. I can't help anybody here anymore." He fell silent, staring at his hands in his lap for a long time. "I think maybe it's time for me to go."

"Sirius..." Harry groaned. "Don't even talk like that! We want you here. This is *YOUR* house, for Merlin's sake!"

"No, really, Harry, I've been thinking about it. I could move back to my place in Bristol. I could work. A Muggle job. I've always liked machines, maybe I could make

motorbikes. Or fix them. Or something. Or I can cook. I'm a good cook, you know, I hardly ever cooked with magic, even when I could."

Harry shook his head, completely nonplussed. "Sirius. Just think a minute. You don't know the first thing about living as a Muggle. You never even took Muggle Studies, did you?"

Sirius puffed his chest defiantly. "I'm a Squib, not an idiot, Harry. I can learn."

"Overnight?" snapped Harry, forgetting to contradict the 'Squib' comment in his frustration. "Sirius, listen to me. You can't just walk into a Muggle city with nothing at all and make a life for yourself. You won't fit in. Muggles are as put off by strangers as wizards are, maybe even more so. You don't have any identification, diplomas, passports... not even a driver license. People will think you're some sort of criminal on the run, barging into town with no history or references. You've never had a job. You've never paid a bill... you've never used electricity! Not to mention that you were all over the Muggle news after you escaped from Azkaban--if anyone remembers that rubbish and recognizes you, you'll end up in jail!"

Sirius continued to stare at his hands, his face growing colder and more distant by the minute. "Hey!" said Harry angrily. "I'm talking to you! Look, I know you're upset about losing your magic--"

"YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!" bellowed Sirius, bolting upright with a murderous rage in his eyes. Harry shrank back in his chair, intimidated even though Sirius could not possibly harm him, any more than the Dursleys could. "You can't know what it's like, Harry, none of you can. I'm worse than dead! I'm broken!" He buried his face in his hands. "Even Remus can't understand. He loses himself, but he gets himself back as soon as the full moon is over. I'll never be myself again, Harry. I'm not a wizard anymore. I'm not Sirius Black anymore. I'm nothing."

Sirius spoke in a flat, uncaring monotone, but it didn't fool Harry for a second. "That's not true!" he exclaimed. "You don't know that. You've only seen one Healer. Maybe a specialist would do better at treating this. And you haven't let me try, or Tura, to unlock your mind again. All you do is avoid everyone, even though we're all so glad to have you back. Why, Sirius? Why won't you let someone help you?"

Sirius leapt from his chair, turning his back. "Because no one can help me," he hissed. "That thing killed my magic. It's gone forever."

Harry's hands clenched involuntarily; there were times he wanted to wring his godfather's neck. "You don't know that," he repeated, forcing himself to speak calmly. "No one knows what that thing is, or what it did to you, or whether it's permanent! You have to try, Sirius!"

"And what if I try and nothing happens, Harry?" Sirius said, so quietly that Harry could barely hear. "I'll tell you what. Then I'll have no hope left." He paused a moment. "At least this way, even though I know better, my heart still says it's possible."

Harry stared at the older man's back. "Sirius... look, I'm sorry, but that's just stupid! You could go for years before it comes back on its own--you'd rather sit around and be miserable all that time, when you could find out today whether your magic can be restored?"

Sirius spun around to face him, shocking Harry with the desperation in his face. "You're not listening, Harry! All those years in Azkaban, *knew* if I could just hang on, somehow, someday I'd get out. I had hope, Harry. Right now, I can live, *today*, because some crazy part of me still believes I can heal. If I find out for sure that it can't come back..." He shook his head, then looked Harry straight in the eye. "I won't live if my magic is gone forever, Harry. I *won't* go on. Do you understand me?"

Tears burned in Harry's eyes. "Sirius," he whispered, though he had no idea what else to say.

Sirius put his hands in his pockets and looked back down at the carpet. "Harry. You pulled me back from certain death, and I'm grateful to you for that. I'm trying, Harry, to find a way to live with what I have left. I really am. I just... I spent years living at my limits, Harry, and I know what I need. I have to have that hope to keep me going."

"Keep you going? Like this? Miserable and lonely and feeling broken? I wonder, would you even *eat* if people weren't around to make you?"

Sirius averted his eyes. "Food doesn't really taste good anymore, Harry," he admitted almost apologetically.

"Sirius... you're dying. You're not fooling me. You talk about hope, but you'll go off to Bristol and lock yourself in and die a Muggle's death all by yourself where you won't bother anyone. Tell me that's not really the plan."

"It's not," he said unconvincingly.

"Maybe your magic is gone, I don't know," replied Harry with mounting anger, "but maybe it's right there under the surface. How can you walk out of here without even looking? How can you talk about running away and, and, throwing away yourself, your life, without trying?"

"I told you, damn it! With hope, I might make it, but without hope..."

"No! You won't make it. You'll waste away and die, and my heart will rip itself to bits with grief again. As if it wasn't bad enough that you died on me once already! I'm not going to let it happen, Sirius. I'm not letting you leave here without trying to help you!"

"You can't stop me, Harry," said Sirius, his voice fierce and bitter.

Harry clamped his jaw tightly and seized Sirius's shoulders, twisting himself down until he could look his godfather square in the face. "No, Sirius. You can't *stop me*." On an impulse, as Harry pierced the depths of those gray eyes, he concentrated on the thought, *No one can*. Sirius blinked at him in shock, and Harry knew he'd heard it, just as Harry could hear Ondossi inside his mind.

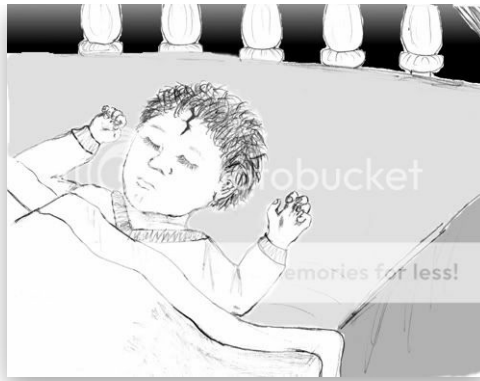
"What are you?" Sirius gasped.

*I'm the son of your best friend,* Harry pushed into his mind with considerable effort. *And I'm going to help you, whether you like it or not.*

## 26: The Pureblood's Tale, part I

Chapter 26 of 50

Harry follows through on his promise to Sirius, starting at an irresistible place in his memory.



"James. Prongs! C'mon, answer! You can't be in bed already...JAMES!"

Sirius refused to give up. He shouted into the mirror over the roar of his motorbike. It was absurd that James would be in bed before midnight. James rattled on about all his new responsibilities, but Merlin's beard, this was *Halloween*. He and James had painted the town red (black?) every Halloween since they were able to sneak out of Hogwarts. They never made plans or set up a time or place to meet; getting together on Halloween was simply a given, an incontrovertible law of nature.

Of course the new baby and the house made things a little different. Sirius understood that. Last year, James and Lily had dressed up the little fellow as a ladybug and taken him around to each of the neighbors for the requisite cooing and gushing. Then they handed out candies to everyone else's children until eight o'clock. Such was the price of having a family in a Muggle neighborhood, and even that was fine; the best parties never started before ten anyway. James had bathed the baby and helped tuck him in, then showed up at Sirius's door in plenty of time, even if he did quit for the night far too early.

When James still hadn't Apparated to Bristol by 9:30, Sirius decided some pressure was in order. He knew that James (well, Lily, really) didn't like it when he came to their house on the chopper because the neighbors complained about the noise, but at least if he arrived on the motorbike, he could be sure that someone would answer the door. There wouldn't be any hiding in bed and pretending not to be home if "The Hog" was rumbling outside the baby's window. Not that little Harry seemed to mind it a bit--the tot slept like a log once he was out. Getting him to sleep was the tricky part.

About halfway to the Hollow, a more evolved portion of Sirius's brain reasoned that James's absence *might* indicate some sort of controversy within the Potter household, and if that was the case, showing up late at night on the chopper *could* conceivably add to the problem, rather than solve it. Leaning back, Sirius steadied the handlebars with one ankle and poked through various pockets until he found the mirror. He nearly dropped it as he realized that releasing the throttle made him lose considerable altitude, and he was now heading straight for a steeple. Fortunately, he had time to shove the mirror into his lap before he lunged for the controls, and kept an awkward grip on it with his legs while he revved up the engine and turned hard to the left. Aside from a slight scratch in the chrome from the weather vane, the maneuver went off flawlessly.

"Yo, Jimbo," he taunted into the mirror. "I know you can hear me. Get off your--"

"All right, all right, I'm here, you big git!" The mirror lit up as James's face appeared, Muggle-style electric lamps in the background. He looked both annoyed and pleased to see Sirius. "You're lucky you didn't finish that sentence, chump. We have a new rule here, now that Harry's talking: every time you swear, you have to put a Sickle in the piggy bank. Kid's going to be the richest boy in England between you and Peter."

Sirius laughed. "Bloody brilliant! Using your child to extort your friends--you always had the best head for business, James."

"Wasn't my idea," James said glumly. "Lily's. I'm already in the damn thing for three Galleons."

"I heard that," said Lily's distant voice. James grimaced painfully, but dutifully reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out a silver coin, which made a metallic clunk inside the little ceramic pig on the countertop.

"A necessary evil," sighed James. "Harry's picking up a new word every few days now, and Mum doesn't want her darling boy talking like a stevedore's poltergeist if she can help it."

"Nothing to fret over, Uncle Sirius'll teach him the ropes in good time. Talking of which, I'll start with you: what are you doing milling about the house on Halloween?"

James averted his eyes but set his jaw. "I know, I know. I should have at least said something--"

"Said something!" interrupted Sirius reprovingly. "Nothing to say, mate. We made a promise and we're sticking to it. That's that. I'll be there in fifteen and you'd better be ready."

James hung his head. "Sirius, I can't do it. I know, I know," he said, looking at his friend with pleading eyes. He recited in a sing-song voice: "*Their greatest victories are when they scare us out of living our normal lives*. But this is different! Dumbledore *knows* we've been targeted. Specifically! I'm not hiding in fear of a random strike, Sirius, I'm..." James paused and looked away, apparently at a loss for an appropriate description.

Sirius sighed. "All right, mate, no need to drag it out. I'll just bring the party to... James?" Raw adrenaline suddenly flooded Sirius's body; James was staring intently in the direction of their front door.

"An automobile just pulled up, Sirius," said James, his voice deepened by his own rush of adrenaline. James set the mirror on the kitchen counter, propping it against a canister. Sirius still had a view of the kitchen and foyer, but James flicked a switch on the wall and the mirror went dark. Sirius's mouth went dry as he opened the throttle of the chopper as far as it would go.

They had worked many long hours developing the charm for those mirrors. Sirius knew full well that only James could see or hear him; anyone else would see only their own reflection. Nonetheless, his voice dropped to a whisper. "Who is it? James!"

A light came on from somewhere behind the countertop. Sirius caught a brief glimpse of James standing beside the foyer window, peeking out from the edge of the curtain with his wand in hand. Lily started to speak, but before she could complete a word, James spoke over her. "Turn it off!" he hissed sharply, never taking his eyes off the window, and the light immediately disappeared. There were quick, noisy footsteps as though Lily had run down the stairs, but there was nothing at all to be seen in the mirror.

"Talk to me, James," said Sirius urgently.

"I don't know. It's from the Ministry. Nothing's happening, it's just sitting there. No one's getting out. I don't like this, Sirius. Do you think maybe it's about Remus? It'd be just like those zealots at the Werewolf Registry to be working at this hour on a holiday."

Sirius hoped with every fiber of his being that it was the Werewolf Registry. Remus knew where the Potters lived, obviously, and could have guided the Ministry to their

home even after the Fidelius charm had been cast. And those prats never seemed to tire of harassing Remus--it *would* be typical of them to detain him on Halloween and demand proof of his location during the last three full moons.

"All right, I'm nearly there," began Sirius, but James suddenly spoke, in a tone of controlled terror that shot through Sirius's chest like an arrow.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off."

Lily's footsteps dashed back up the stairs. The front door smashed open, briefly framing the silhouette of a tall figure against the faint moonlight outside. James immediately cast the "*Expelliarmus*," but another voice, louder, quicker, was already incanting "*Avada Kedavra*."

For a split second, the mirror flashed with green light, then showed only the reflection of the stars.

No.

No.

It was impossible. Unthinkable. Something had happened, but it couldn't possibly be what it seemed. They were hidden behind the Fidelius curse. Doubly so, even. Peter was made the Secret-Keeper, just to put another layer of confusion between the Potters and the Dark forces. No one would ever suspect that Peter was the Secret-Keeper; he was too far down the food chain for anyone to entrust him with so much. Which is exactly why Sirius had insisted he do it--what better way to hide the Secret in plain sight?

No. Voldemort could not possibly have found them, it was just... impossible. It had to be. Some slick little Death Eater trailed them home somehow, someone James could handle. James was already Disarming them when they cast that curse at him. Obviously their wand was not under their control when the spell discharged; it must have flown off at a crazy angle and smashed right into the mirror. In minutes, Sirius would arrive at the house and find the shards of the mirror all over the kitchen, and whoever James was pinning down to the tile in the foyer would get the beating of his life.

By the time Sirius's sensible side broke through the horror and disbelief, he was so close to Godric's Hollow that he would waste more time trying to land the bike and Apparate straight to the house than to simply keep driving. He could see the lights of the Hollow dead ahead. Sirius did not descend until he was practically on top of their house, not wanting any bother from treetops or power lines in his haste. Dropping steeply, he noticed that the house looked a bit strange from above and he could see no sign of a car. Still, it was pretty dark out, perhaps once he got on the ground he...

With a violent wrench of nausea, Sirius realized that he was less than ten meters from the ground and the roof of the house was still well below him.

How he managed to land the bike, Sirius couldn't remember. His body was acting on some sort of autopilot. He did not recall dismounting from the chopper either. When he heard his name, he simply found himself standing beside the bike, staring at the heap of rubble that had once been his favorite place in the world.

It wasn't James or Lily, but a familiar voice nonetheless. Sirius tried several times to answer, but in his shock he couldn't manage a coherent reply. There was someone moving inside the wreckage, and--wait--the baby! The baby was crying!

His heart began to pound even harder; maybe they were okay, maybe the impact of the spell had brought down the house (and broken the mirror) but they were simply trapped. There was Harry and... Hagrid? Merlin, Mordred and Morgana, what was Hagrid doing here? "Where are they? Where's James?" he heard himself say.

"I dunno, Black, I dunno what happened. Someone's been dragged out, maybe it was James pullin' Lily, I dunno."

Dragged. No one would be so stupid. Not James. If Lily were hurt, he would Apparate her straight to St. Mungo's, not drag her through broken beams and plaster. That single word snapped something inside Sirius's mind, broke through the desperate denial and brought home the reality.

"It wasn't James," he said, choking on the words. "James is dead."

His best friend, dead. It should have been him. In a flash of insight, he realized that *he* should have been in the house in the Hollow with the Fidelius charm. James and his family should have run even further, hidden even deeper, left him in their place with a barrel of Polyjuice potion and a toy doll to carry past the windows. He should have been inside the house, a decoy, to suss out whether Voldemort really had a traitor deep enough inside the Order to betray their secret.

A brilliant plan that was only an hour too late.

Hagrid spoke. "Lily." Sirius understood immediately. Little Harry had survived; if Voldemort came only for James, Lily might still be alive. *Give me Harry and go find her!* Sirius thought desperately, even as Hagrid said, "Take the lad." Sirius squeezed the little fellow as hard as he dared, finding sudden, unexpected comfort in this warm wiggly bundle that represented all the best in James and Lily.

As Hagrid plowed through the rubble, Sirius took a closer look at Harry's little face. His forehead had been gashed, but Sirius had seen enough combat to recognize a superficial wound. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at the laceration. "*Consutum*," he murmured, and the bleeding quickly stopped as the edges of the wound reapproximated. This was only the first of a series of spells to close wounds without scarring, but Sirius had learned only the most basic healing spells for emergencies. It would do for now, until he could get the baby to a Healer.

He realized, too late again, that he had not used any sort of anesthetic spell; the closure of the wound must have been painful. Crushing guilt struck him anew, that he had hurt his precious godson out of carelessness and distraction. *A fine first step as the caretaker for this child.* Sirius burst into tears.

He knew as soon as he saw Hagrid's face that the giant had found Lily and she was gone. *It should have been me*, he thought again, sobbing harder as the last threads of hope were cut. But Hagrid was trying to help him to his feet, and there were sirens approaching. The last thing any of them needed was a bunch of Muggles swarming around right now; the grief would have to wait. Sirius was a soldier and he knew that none of them were safe here. He had to get Little Harry far, far away.

Hagrid seemed to be reaching for the baby. "I'll take him," Sirius said, though he immediately realized he wasn't quite sure how he might carry Little Harry on the motorbike. It wasn't considered safe to Apparate children under the age of four; their little skulls hadn't fused solid yet and the pressure could hurt them.

"Maybe he oughter come with me, ter Hogwarts... Dumbledore might--" began Hagrid, but Sirius had heard enough. Dumbledore had suggested the Fidelius Charm, and look at what good it had done.

"I'll take him," he said defiantly, daring Hagrid to contradict him. But this was ridiculous, Hagrid wasn't the enemy. The man couldn't squash a gnat without doing penance to the entire Gnat Nation. Sirius forced himself to slow down and speak with reason. "I'm his godfather. I'm all he has left. He's all I--"

*James.* James was gone, dead, and Little Harry was his only legacy. *No more crying, there's no time.* *Focus.* Whimpering, Harry put his head on Sirius's shoulder and touched his throat with his tiny fingers; they were cold. All he had on were jammies and a thin yellow blanket. All right. Sirius could kill all the birds with one stone by tucking the little fellow into his coat. Harry would be warm and cozy, and Sirius would have both hands free to operate the chopper.

Sirius heard Hagrid say something as he jumped onto the motorbike, but he knew the Muggles were practically on top of them. Only after he had cleared fifty meters of altitude did he realize he ought to have offered Hagrid a lift. The Muggle police would have a heyday with him, until the Aurors arrived and made things even harder.

Nobody would be looking up in the sky at the moment. Sirius cast a Silencing Spell about the chopper and doubled back to check for Hagrid. The giant was nowhere to be seen. Sirius circled the scene a few times just in case Hagrid tried to signal him from some hiding place, but apparently he had his escape route planned in advance. When



Sirius was satisfied that he wasn't abandoning Hagrid to the mercy of the Muggles and the Ministry, he fingered the throttle lever, then paused.

What if, what if... Denial and doubt began to rear their desperate heads again in his mind. James could still be alive down there. Lily was gone, but maybe the curse *had* missed him. Maybe it hit Lily instead, or maybe it just detonated and brought the house down around them before she had time to get her wand and protect herself. James had his wand; he might only be trapped under the rubble.

Muggles were swarming like ants, and he suspected some of them were scouts from the Ministry already--especially since one of them had escorted Voldemort here in a bloody official car! Sirius vehemently wished he had James's Invisibility Cloak on him, but he realized he had something almost as good: the mirror. He pulled it from a pocket of his leather jacket.

"James? James, mate, I'm right above you, if you can make any sound at all, do it. I'll get you out if I have to break every law in the books." No response. "James!" Sirius shouted as loud as he could into the mirror. "JAMES!" Nothing.

*It doesn't matter*, thought Sirius. *He could still be down there. Maybe the mirror is broken.* He envisioned the flash of green light before the mirror went dead. That was an ironic phrase. Either the mirror had died, or James had; this was the nature of the charm they had placed upon it so carefully. It suddenly dawned on Sirius that he could check whether the mirror was whole or not. Descending again as low as he dared over the Potters' former kitchen, Sirius pointed his wand straight down and murmured, "*Accio James's mirror.*"

When it floated up to his hand unbroken, he opened the throttle on the bike and pointed it at the stars.

*Not Bristol. Not London.* Sirius knew he couldn't fly around on the bike forever, but he was at a loss for a destination. Dumbledore had been right; there was a traitor, someone so far inside that they had prepared this strike before the Fidelius charm was cast. Either that, or Peter had been tortured into surrendering the Secret and was probably dead.

*Now there's a thought.* If they simply killed Peter, the Fidelius charm would be broken and anyone could have led a parade to Godric's Hollow if they had an inkling of the Potters' address. If someone had tortured it out of Peter, or killed him and then tortured it out of Remus... Sirius shuddered. The thought that he could very well be the last living Marauder turned his stomach violently.

His head was swimming from altitude, grief, and shock, but he knew that remaining in motion would protect him (and Little Harry) better than anything else until he could figure out a plan. The baby was sleeping soundly inside his jacket, despite the fact that he was crumpled and twisted in what had to be the most uncomfortable position ever devised outside of a torture chamber. Sirius gazed down at him fondly; the little sprat was tough.

Not tough enough to take into a danger zone, however. Peter and Remus might be in dire peril or dead, but there was nothing Sirius could do for them until Harry was tucked away someplace safe. *And where, exactly, would that be?* It all came back around to that. Voldemort had used information from a traitor in the Order of the Phoenix, and someone from the Ministry had helped him. That seemed to eliminate all of England, if not the entire UK.

*I've got to go somewhere I've never gone*, he thought. *Somewhere no one will recognize me. The people I trust cannot be trusted, therefore I have to find strangers to trust.* Ugh. The doublespeak alone was enough to drive him crazy.

"Never been to Wales," he muttered out loud. "Fancy a trip, Harry?" He had flown in a vaguely northeast direction from the Hollow; setting a new course would be wise at this point anyway. Banking the motorbike sharply to the left, Sirius reckoned he could be over Gwynedd in an hour. Gwynedd was the Bohemian sector of Wizarding Britain, reknown both for its size and its eccentricity. Many of these "freaks and Druids" (as his parents had called them) had probably never heard of Voldemort, much less Sirius Black. *Find an inn, get a room with a Floo, and put your head together.*

He grounded the bike in some town near the coast, intending to search the along the main street for the subtle signs that indicated a Wizard-friendly business. To his surprise, however, it seemed as though he'd somehow ended up in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. Wizarding folk were everywhere, dancing on sidewalks, shouting from windows, their wands out in the open with no apparent thought for Muggles. He pulled off the road and just sat, watching the revelry in disbelief and wondering if the strain was making him hallucinate. Okay, it *was* Halloween, but no holiday party in history had ever been *this much* fun.

A trio of pretty witches passed the bike, singing something in the Welsh tongue. If there was one thing Sirius did without planning or forethought, it was chatting up the ladies, and he was certainly desperate for information. One of them turned her head to admire the bike, and his instincts kicked in automatically.

"You ride?" he asked, not quite smiling, but tipping his head invitationally. She stopped singing and nudged one of the other *chanteuses*, who glanced at him, giggled and winked at her friend, and went off with the other. The first witch came over and smiled at him.

"Never have, but tonight I'm ready for just about anything," she said. There was Firewhiskey on her breath.

*Oh, for the love of Merlin, why does this kind of thing only happen during times like these?* That so? Why tonight?" Sirius crossed his fingers, hoping that Little Harry would remain asleep for a few more minutes.

"Haven't you heard, handsome? You-Know-Who's been killed! Not two hours ago! The Dark Times are over!" She twirled in a pirouette, flaring out her maroon robes but then breaking into a distinct wobble, demonstrating the effects of the Firewhiskey. Fortunately, she righted herself against the handlebars and Sirius was not forced to jostle Harry in order to catch her. She laughed at her own unsteadiness, and Sirius wished he could laugh with her.

"You're joking!" he said. "How did it happen?"

Her eyes lit up at the prospect of breaking the news to an uninformed stranger. "Down in the West Country. He attacked a family, killed the parents, but somehow their baby survived! It's a miracle, don't you see? You-Know-Who tried to kill the baby too, but the curse bounced back and killed him instead. A baby killed You-Know-Who! The little chap must be the strongest wizard in history!" She laughed again, but did not attempt another pirouette.

This was more than Sirius could handle while maintaining a cool composure, but fortunately a dropped jaw was the fashionable response to the news. "Impossible," he croaked, though he didn't doubt the story one bit, just the fact that it had spread so widely and so accurately.

"No, it's true! It came straight from the Ministry in London! They have the baby, there'll be photos in the *Prophet* tomorrow of the Boy Who Lived."

Sirius felt like a tube of toothpaste which had been handed to a gorilla. The girl stepped back in alarm at his expression. "What's the matter with you?" she said heatedly, backing away. "You look downright disappointed!"

"No, no--hey, I'm not one of them," he managed to sputter, raising up the cuff of his jacket to reveal his forearm, emphasizing his point. "I'm just... wow. A bit taken aback. I mean, really, a baby... How could that be true? Maybe it's all an elaborate plot of some kind." *Maybe?? Morgan le Fay, what have I stumbled into here?*

The witch frowned at him, then grinned again and gave him a dismissive wave. "Oh, don't be such a killjoy! It's true, our Ministry rep confirmed it from London. Come on," she said, tugging his hand playfully, "this is the happiest night in fifty years! Get up and celebrate!"

"Okay, okay," Sirius said, thinking quickly. "I just need to find a tavern and put my bike away. Can you help--"

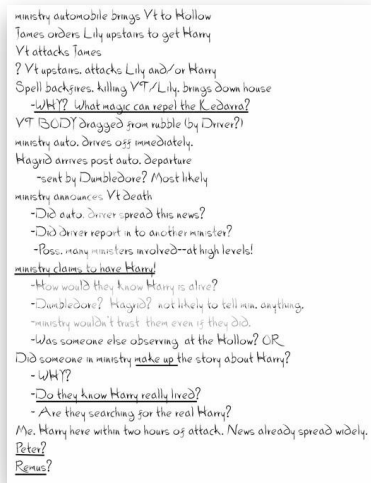
She cut him off in mid-inquiry. "Oh, just up the street, then, the Hound and Child. Better hurry, everyone's coming into town tonight. I'll look for you in a bit!" She gave him a lovely smile and capered off with a new group of passing witches.

He found the tavern easily enough, though the proprietor was downright peevish about being asked to let a room. He had his hands quite full with orders from the bar. Sirius opened his jacket enough to reveal the back of Harry's little head and the fellow changed his tune, clearly aware that a squalling baby would disrupt his business far more than a few delayed drinks. He handed Sirius a key and told him rather kindly how to find the kitchen if the baby needed anything.

The room was quiet despite the noise in the pub below and in the street. Sirius tucked Harry into the day-bed, then collapsed for a few moments on his own feather mattress.

What in the name of Merlin was happening?

In the end, he was forced to pilfer a roll of parchment and a quill from a rolltop desk just outside the kitchen and write it all out. His head was still whirling with grief, and he couldn't afford to leave out any details. After twenty minutes, he had to go get another parchment, as he had so many insertions, margin notes, and arrows, it was like reading a maze. He copied it in proper order onto the new parchment.



ministry automobile brings Vt to Hollow  
James orders Lily upstairs to get Harry  
Vt attacks James  
? Vt upstairs, attacks Lily and/or Harry  
Spell backfires, killing Vt/Lily, brings down house  
-WHY? What magic can repel the K-davra?  
Vt BCD? Dragged from rubble (by Driver?)  
ministry auto. Drives off immediately.  
Hagrid arrives post auto. departure  
-sent by Dumbledore? Most likely  
ministry announces Vt death  
-Did auto. driver spread this news?  
-Did driver report it to another minister?  
-Base, many ministers involved--at high levels!  
ministry claims to have Harry!  
-How would they know Harry is alive?  
-Dumbledore? Hagrid? not likely to tell him anything.  
-ministry wouldn't trust them even if they did.  
-Was someone else observing at the Hollow? OR  
Did someone in ministry make up the story about Harry?  
- WHY?  
-Do they know Harry really lived?  
- Are they searching for the real Harry?  
Me, Harry here within two hours of attack. News already spread widely.  
Peter?  
Remus?

Sirius stared at the list for several minutes, trying to decide what was most important. *Would that be the Ministry traitor that helped Voldemort? The Ministry conspiracy to present a phony "boy who lived" to the public? Or the fact that Harry somehow killed the Darkest wizard on Earth--the sort of thing that's generally done by a Darker wizard?* He looked over at the sleeping baby. Little Harry certainly didn't look like a fearsome Dark wizard, snoozing peacefully under a teddy-bear blanket with his hands flopped on either side of his head. But Voldemort had once been handsome too, and Sirius gritted his teeth at the sight of the wound on Harry's head. Voldemort's magic had touched the boy, of that he was certain; whether it went deeper than the physical wound was a separate and terrifying matter.

Sirius bit his lip. He wanted desperately to find out if Peter and Remus were safe, but ultimately it didn't matter; with Voldemort dead, they were probably not in danger, and therefore they could wait. That the Ministry was corrupt was certainly no news to *him*. Only people with an unslakable thirst for power would spend so many years clawing and stabbing their way up through the ranks. Sirius had always felt that anyone who desired to hold an office should automatically be disqualified for the position. The only competent blokes in the whole Ministry building were the ones that quietly went to their office every day and gasp-did their jobs. There was at least one conspiracy going on, perhaps more, but it would all be well hidden behind lies, scapegoats, and "plausible deniability." Someone else would have to untangle that web.

He knew what he must do. Harry was his godson. He had vowed to protect this boy as his own flesh and blood. And no son of Sirius Black would live to see another dawn if he were poisoned with the Dark magic of Voldemort.

## 27: The Pureblood's Tale, Part II

Chapter 27 of 50

Sirius Black's adventures on November 1 and 2, 1981, continue to be revealed.

Sirius paced around the small room, glad that the racket from the party would more than mask his incessant footsteps. If someone were to pound angrily on his door and complain about the noise, he might haul off and deck them. He had one nerve left and no one had better get on it.

He had to figure out whom he could still trust. There was only one traitor, after all, or at least he *hoped* there was only one. He didn't have to bear this burden alone, he could get help... as long as he didn't ask that one wrong person.

Remus and Peter were out. It seemed impossible, but many impossible things had happened that night. He had to consider that it could be one of them. They were certainly in the best position to betray the location of Godric's Hollow.

Sirius forced himself to think about Dumbledore. The Headmaster had warned James that he was being targeted and suggested the Fidelius Charm--and within a week, James was dead. Coincidence? Possibly. Set-up? Possibly. Voldemort had long considered James an annoyance, but suddenly took this specific interest--why? Perhaps Dumbledore had deliberately used the Potters as *bait*! Dumbledore might have made up this entire "prophecy" business and deliberately leaked it to Voldemort's spies. It was more than a year ago (supposedly) that this so-called prophecy was made, but Voldemort was only acting on it now? Was this because Dumbledore sent the Potters into hiding to *entice* him?

Dumbledore could have rigged the house to ensure Voldemort would never leave once he went in--which would certainly account for the collapse of the structure much better than a ricocheted Kedavra curse. And it would explain why Hagrid was sent to the Hollow before the dust even had time to settle. That Dumbledore would stoop to sacrifice the Potters was a sickening thought, but no less so than the concept of Peter or Remus betraying them. Sirius had to consider the Headmaster a threat as well.

Not the Ministry, not the Order, not Hogwarts. Sirius began to think that perhaps strangers were his best recourse for help. But Merlin's Beard, tonight's work was too

important. Sirius remembered all too well what his brother Regulus had told him, not days before he was killed: that Voldemort was using ancient Dark magic to become immortal. Sirius had scoffed at the time. Everyone knew the closest one could get to immortality was the Elixir of Life, an alchemical process. Dark magic was about death and control, not eternal life. But Regulus had been so certain, and Voldemort had killed him personally...

Sirius peered for the hundredth time at the sleeping baby. He had no doubt in his mind that the scar on Harry's head was magical in origin. It was a perfectly shaped bolt of lightning, without bruising--the odds of some piece of flying shrapnel making such a wound were nil. If Voldemort truly took some Dark precaution against his own death, then Little Harry's body might even now be a vessel to house Voldemort until he recovered from the attack. Sirius bit his lip. This was not a question he could trust any stranger to answer.

Who, then? He had to stop eliminating people; it was getting him nowhere. *I don't know who the traitor is. But I can figure out who the traitor **isn't**. There have to be some people who are absolutely beyond reproach.*

"Like Dumbledore or Remus," he said out loud, spite and pain weighing heavily in his voice. The baby stirred, which was almost laughable after he'd slept through a ride on the chopper and a trip through the noisy pub. Sirius remembered James bemoaning the fact that the boy still woke up hungry in the middle of the night, despite their efforts to stuff him with food at bedtime. With a quick glance at his watch on the nightstand, Sirius realized he'd better go fetch some milk.

The kitchen smelled of sausages and Sirius brought back some Welsh currant cakes and butterbeer, but when he was out of sniffing range of the savory aromas, his appetite died as suddenly as it had flared. His stomach felt as tense as a bowstring. He drank the hot butterbeer and fed the grouchy baby milk from a cup. Fortunately, Little Harry nodded back off to sleep when he finished his milk, leaving Sirius free to stare into the bottom of his butterbeer mug and return to his thoughts.

Alastor Moody? Sirius had spoken to him on several occasions. The man knew his Dark Arts, that was certain, but talk about paranoia! If Little Harry had so much as a mote of Dark magic lingering on his pajamas, Moody would probably send the tot to Azkaban. No, this called for a slightly more level head than old "Mad-Eye."

The Longbottoms? They were top-notch Aurors and they had a boy about Harry's age. Of course they were little more than strangers too, even more so than Moody. Sirius buried his face in his hands in frustration--the bottom line was that most of his friends in the Order, like Benjy Fenwick and the Prewett brothers, were dead.

But wait--what about Molly Prewett? Gid and Fabian had introduced him to Molly several times and thought the world of her. She was married but they kept calling her "Prewett" just to annoy her. Her new name was... what, something like Wimbley, Wheatley... Weasley. *That's right, her husband's in the Ministry, one of those blokes at the bottom that do all the actual work.* In fact, he was a distant cousin who had been similarly disowned by the Most Noble House of Black. That made up his mind; if he couldn't trust Gid's sister and another "black sheep Black," he might as well go live in a cave.

Sirius lit the fire in his room and tossed in some Floo powder. Only after he stepped into it with Little Harry draped bonelessly over his arms did he remember it was nearly six AM. *Oh, well,* he thought with a shrug. Molly was in for the shock of her life anyway, might as well get off with a strong start.

To his surprise, there were lamps burning cheerily in her kitchen when he reached their fireplace. Six o'clock only came once a day for Sirius Black--he didn't normally stay up this late. Realizing that whoever lit the lamps would probably react unpleasantly to an intruder, Sirius ducked the second he stepped out of the Floo. Sure enough, something ruffled the hair on top of his head; Molly Prewett Weasley stood not three feet away in a long flannel nightdress, the wrought-iron poker from the fireplace still swinging in a backhand arc.

"What the--" "Molly, wait, it's--" "Sirius Black?" The poker remained poised for a second strike, but she had recognized him. He had a few seconds to persuade her not to crack his skull. "Molly, please. I need your help. I'm sorry to barge in like this. There's been an attack." Her eyes softened and the poker slowly sunk into a less lethal position.

"An attack. What? Is that a *baby*? Alright, come in, come in, dear," she said, motioning him to take a seat at the kitchen table, her maternal impulses finally overcoming her suspicion and shock. She took Harry from him immediately, bundling him expertly in the blanket with one hand and gently pushing his head back onto her shoulder when he tried to have a groggy look around. Harry must have sensed he was in the presence of a master, as he quickly gave up and snuggled down obediently for a snooze.

It didn't take long for Sirius to tell his tale. Molly squirmed uncomfortably and bit her lip as Sirius informed her that she was, in fact, holding the "boy who lived" in her arms.

"Sirius, what are you saying? If this is Harry Potter, then who is the baby in the Ministry?"

"That's the question of the hour, now, isn't it?" he agreed. "There's no mistake, Molly, I'm the baby's godfather. I know this is Harry. I arrived minutes after it happened, before anyone from the Ministry. I took him out of danger and I've had him ever since." Sirius didn't tell her about the Ministry automobile or the dragged-off body; he knew the story already sounded improbable, and Molly's trust in him was surely tentative at best.

She nodded. "Well, of course, that was the right thing to do. And I suppose that when Magical Catastrophes arrived, they must have noticed that the baby was gone and assumed he'd survived. But they say they *have* the baby! This doesn't make sense!"

"You don't have to tell me, that's been a recurring theme tonight. For all we know, someone kidnapped some little tyke and turned him in to the Ministry, hoping for a reward. Who knows? That can all be figured out later. What's important right now, Molly, is that this baby was the last person to see Voldemort alive, and he has a magical injury on his forehead. Molly, I'm scared. What if Voldemort possessed the boy? What if he's not dead at all, but somehow hiding inside Little Harry?"

Molly pulled her chin in and stared hard at Sirius, cuddling Harry protectively. "Don't be ridiculous, Sirius. No one can do that!"

"Oh, and babies kill full-grown wizards every day of the week, do they?" he barked in reply. Molly glared at him, but she averted her eyes and nodded.

"I suppose both stories are equally ridiculous," she said coolly.

"I shouldn't have snapped. It's been a horrible night, Molly."

Her hand moved to his forearm. "Nothing to worry about," she said kindly, helping him to his feet and guiding him into a soft armchair in the family room. "I'll put the kettle on. Arthur will be down soon and we'll think this through."

Despite himself, Sirius dozed in the chair before the Weasleys joined him with a tray of tea and porridge. Harry hadn't budged from his perch in Molly's left arm, but an even tinier redhead now occupied her right. Sirius shook himself awake. "Another new cousin?" he asked Arthur.

"That's right! Our little girl," said Arthur, beaming proudly. "Ginevra."

"She's beautiful," said Sirius, too bleary-eyed to be sure, but it was never a mistake to say it.

Arthur's tone immediately turned businesslike. "Molly's told me about this little fellow. I'm not sure what to say, Sirius. I'm inclined to bring him in to the Ministry--"

"No," said Sirius bluntly, cutting Arthur off in mid-sentence.

Arthur frowned, puzzled. "They can determine if You-Know-Who has...touched this child, AND it would prove the boy they have is not Harry Potter--"

"NO!" he repeated angrily. Arthur frowned again, and Sirius knew he needed to explain himself. "I don't trust the Ministry. I'm... not sure they didn't make up the whole 'boy who lived' business, and if they did, you can bet they won't appreciate meeting the *real* boy who lived."

Arthur leaned back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the rim of his porridge bowl. "Sirius, you've been up all night and you've been through a terrible shock..."

"Don't start it, Arthur. I'm not taking Harry to the Ministry and that's final."

"All right, all right, it's your decision. You understand that I do have to let my superiors know they have the wrong baby, and they may not believe me without proof. If they've been deceived about this other baby, things could get very complicated before the truth is found."

"Not my problem," said Sirius stiffly. "They issued a report without confirming the facts, they can flounder and retract and suffer the consequences. I'm sorry, Arthur. I'm not feeling disposed toward your employer at the moment."

Arthur sighed and glanced at Molly, but nodded. "At best, it was very irresponsible to announce that they had the boy without speaking to his guardian first. All right. Well, what do you want from us, then?"

Sirius closed his eyes. They felt dry and sharp, while his wits were dulling by the minute. "I don't know who I can trust. You understand that the boy's parents were betrayed by someone deep within the Order of the Phoenix? It's the only explanation for how they were found and attacked. I don't know how to look into this boy, to find Voldemort if he's there. I need help." He looked imploringly at Molly. "Gid always told me you were stronger than he and Fabian combined. Coming from him, that really meant something. That's why I came to you. Can you help me?"

Molly glanced between the two men several times, then sighed. "I can try. Not here, though, I don't want the children to have anything to do with this. Arthur, can you take a holiday today?"

He gritted his teeth. "They won't like it, but I have a feeling quite a few people will be skiving off the job today. I'll need to go in as soon as you get back, though, and I should report in about this whole wrong boy business." He rubbed his jaw, obviously ticking off a mental checklist, then looked up with deep concern in his eyes. "Where will you go, Molly? If what Sirius says is true... this could be dangerous."

"I know, Arthur, I know," said Molly, shaking her head wearily. "Let me think a minute."

"We can use my place in Bristol," said Sirius helpfully, "or I've let a room in Wales last night."

"What part of Wales?" Molly asked quickly, her eyes sparking with interest.

"Gwynedd. By the coast. I don't know which town."

Molly nodded approvingly and handed the tinier baby to Arthur. "That won't matter. It'll do quite nicely. I'll find the right people there. Let me pack a few things." She bustled out of the room with a determined air and there was a loud crack of Apparation. Within seconds, the ghoul in the attic let out a yowl and five floors down, they could hear her admonish him sternly to be still or he'd have to put all the children back to sleep.

Arthur gave Sirius a grim look. "I hope you're wrong, Sirius, but if you're right... will you be ready?"

"Heh. That's a loaded question, innit? I've been around Dark magic all my life, I think I can defend myself and Molly, but Harry... I guess we'll just have to see. I know what James would do if the worst came to pass." He set his jaw as he regarded the older wizard, and Arthur did the same.

"Good luck, Sirius," Arthur said as Molly Apparated back into the room with a small red bag.

"Arthur, don't forget to make Charlie and Percy work on writing lessons this morning, and don't let the twins get into the kitchen. Or the shed. Or the onions I just planted. And don't leave them alone with Ronnie either, they're trying to teach him how to take off his diaper. Well, what are you waiting for, Sirius? Let's get going!" She marched smartly to the hearth in the kitchen, and Sirius had to hurry to keep up.

They arrived at his room in the Hound and Child covered with soot; apparently the innkeeper did not bother to sweep the chimneys very frequently. Molly quickly dusted off Little Harry and handed him to Sirius. "You stay here with him," she said. "I'm going to have a look round and see if I can find some familiar faces."

As the door clicked shut behind her, the baby seemed to instinctively recognize that the Voice of Authority had departed, leaving behind only a tired, inexperienced pushover. Harry started to grouse, wriggling out of Sirius's arms to wobble over to the desk. He pulled open the bottom drawer and began removing everything from it, one item at a time, gnawing on each one for a moment before dropping it on the floor. Sirius rested on his side and watched wearily, realizing that the child obviously had no intention of going back to sleep. There was nothing but books and parchment in the drawer, and all of those could withstand a little slobber.

The next thing he knew, there was a small, wet hand squeezing his nose. Sirius bolted upright, scanning the room to get his bearings, then cursed. The sun was well over the horizon; he'd slept at least an hour. Thank goodness Molly hadn't returned, she'd have been furious to find him catnapping while the baby was running loose.

He took a closer look at Little Harry and groaned. The child had managed to pull a jar of ink from the desk and apparently tried first to eat it, and when that proved unsatisfactory, attempted to absorb it through his skin instead. He gave Sirius a huge grin, revealing blackened gums and four slightly bluish teeth.

"Harry James Potter!" Sirius admonished, taking the empty jar. He wondered briefly if ink was poisonous, and decided not to risk it. Rather than simply Scourgify the little rascal, Sirius concentrated and performed a complex Vanishing spell to remove all of the ink, inside and out. Harry didn't seem bothered by the process, but having lost the fascinating ink jar that had held his attention for so long, he immediately went on the prowl for some other piece of contraband. Sirius quickly Transfigured the ink jar into an abacus with big, colorful beads and handed it to the boy. Apparently it was deemed acceptable; it went straight into Harry's mouth.

Sirius sat on the floor this time, not trusting himself in the comfortable bed. He watched Harry play and explore, noting with relief that the child acted pretty much the same as he always had. *But he's just a baby--even Voldemort himself probably played and grinned when he was only a year old.*

Sounds of merrymaking began to carry up from the streets. He peered cautiously through the curtain, squinting in the sunlight. Once again there were throngs of sorcerers parading through the streets and popping off spells in full view. Shaking his head at the spectacle, he heard his name weakly amongst the crowd and spotted Molly Weasley waving at him from the curb. She looked rather unhappy, but gave him a quick thumbs up and motioned that she would be coming up to the room.

"Sirius... What happened to your nose?" she said upon entering. He'd forgotten all about the inky hand that had woken him up.

"Harry did a bit of finger-painting, sorry," he said, wiping ink onto the yellow blanket. To his chagrin, a group of witches followed right behind Molly, all looking rather serious until they caught sight of his nose. One of them picked up Little Harry like a porcelain doll and gazed at him with affectionate awe.

"Ladies," said Molly, "this is Sirius Black, and the baby I spoke of, Harry Potter. These are some... friends of mine, Sirius."

"Friends," said Sirius dubiously. "And do they have names?"

A stooped witch with a long white braid, who looked old enough to be Molly's grandmother, stepped forward with a scowl. "We aren't acquainted, as you've guessed, but we are all friends here. Don't snap at the hand that offers you help, young man."

"It's all right, Sirius," said Molly. "These ladies and I... well, we belong to a... well, a certain society. We don't normally, ah, *include* wizards in our proceedings." She looked very uncomfortable, and kept glancing at the other witches almost pleadingly.

Sirius realized he was being granted a rare privilege; this was no time for screwing around. He knelt solemnly on the floor. "I'm honored," he said, bowing his head. "Forgive me if, in my ignorance of your customs, I disgrace myself." He could almost hear the satisfied looks spread to all their faces.

"Oh, none of that, now; get up!" Molly pretended to chide as she helped him to his feet, but she gave him a quick look of deep gratitude for his gesture of humility. *I've still got it*, he thought privately.

"Fabian was received by the group, but Giddy wasn't ready," continued Molly, removing the last of the ink from Sirius's nose with her wand. "We're the Daughters of Modron, the stewards of Avallocian magic." She peered at Sirius to see if he understood, but the name obviously didn't register. "You and I learned standard Merddynian magic at Hogwarts, but Merlin wasn't the only great sorcerer of his time, not by far. Avallocian magic is a bit different, more feminine, obviously. It's the force behind Apparation, for example; that's why you don't need a wand to Apparate.

"It's hard to control, which is why it fell out of fashion long ago. It generally takes more than one person to complete a spell. For that same reason, it's also harder to corrupt. There simply *isn't* a Dark branch of Avallocian magic; if your intentions are harmful or evil, the magic simply won't manifest." The other ladies nodded, obviously pleased with Molly's summary.

Sirius bowed his head again, thrilled by the prospect of learning a whole new form of magical power. No wonder his parents despised Wales! He knew Molly was really sticking her neck out by bringing him into the group. "I've never been more honored," he said quietly and sincerely, without the formality he'd used earlier. Molly's eyes sparkled warmly, and even the old crone gave him a wrinkled smile.

The whole group made their way to the seashore, alone or in pairs to avoid attention. Molly walked with Sirius and Harry, explaining that he would have to Apparate about a mile offshore and ten feet above the surface and let himself fall into the sea. "It'll be rough, Sirius; there's normally a series of rituals for novitiates, to lead up to this one. But this is an emergency, obviously, and... Fabian told me about you. You'll handle it. All you have to do is fall in. We'll be conducting the ritual on the beach. If your mind and heart are suitable for Avallocian magic, you'll sink like a lead ingot. When you hit bottom, just walk back to the beach--the magic will sustain you even though you can't breathe."

That made him halt in his tracks. "Sink? What happens if the magic doesn't take?"

She made a face. "Well, you might sink then too, but you won't have to worry about the long walk. You can swim to shore if you have to. You *can* swim, right?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I can dog paddle."

"That'll do, if it comes to that. I'd much prefer if you were able to walk; we really need you to stand by the baby if you can."

When they arrived at the shore, the other Daughters were apparently starting whatever ritual they were going to perform on him, or for him. They were sitting in a circle on a flat rock, chanting and clapping a complex rhythm as a very pretty witch around Sirius's age danced in the center. He recalled Molly's comment about this magic becoming unfashionable and smirked. People could be such idiots.

Molly eyed him narrowly. "You boys are all the same," she huffed. "The first time Fabian saw an enchantment, he said if it were up to him, this kind of magic would be mandatory. As if you don't get to ogle the ladies enough already." She shook her head, but he caught a secret smile when she turned away.

The two of them waited as more witches took their places in the circle, then at some unseen signal, Molly took Harry from him. "Your wand," she whispered, holding out her hand. With a pang of fear, he surrendered it to her. He felt very awkward without it under the best circumstances, but there was apparently no way around it. *Well, even if I can't swim back, Padfoot can*. He set his jaw.

"Sirius?" whispered Molly as he prepared to Apparate. "Walk *uphill*."

He'd never intentionally Apparated to thin air before, and he ended up having to focus on a small buoy floating a little more than a mile out and several hundred yards up the beach. He tried to fling himself back on target as the magic kicked in, but he never knew if he succeeded. He reappeared facing out to sea, and before he had time to get his bearings, he was plunged into the freezing water.

Instinctively, he kicked up toward the surface, where the sun was fractured into a glowing mosaic by the waves. But he was falling through the sea as though it were just more air. Even though Molly had told him that this was supposed to happen, Sirius panicked; every corner of his brain screamed, "You're drowning! Swim for your life!"

Holding his breath became harder by the second as he flailed madly with his arms and legs. He had no buoyancy whatsoever; he could neither swim nor tread water, any more than he could paddle through air to cross the street. *I'm going to die!* He'd never felt so helpless. *Not like this!* He landed so hard that he sank in the muck to his knees, and the shock of it knocked his last breath out of him. Or so he thought, until to his utter amazement, he took another one.

Sirius stood in that spot, slowly sinking, for several minutes, gazing in awe about him. The cold and pressure he expected at this depth were absent. The sea around him was clear as air, the surface far above him

a glistening new sky. *This must be the way fish and mermaids see the world*, he pondered.

Something brushed his fingertips. A silvery fish hovered beside him, apparently wondering whether he was edible. Sirius shooed it away and began the slow process of extracting his feet from the murky sea bed. It was tricky business, for one foot would sink deeper as he shifted his weight to pull the other foot up. He finally wriggled his way to freedom and took a few steps, coming to a sudden halt as he realized he was heading down a very gentle slope. *The beach is uphill*, he reminded himself, and turned around. Sure enough, the horizon climbed up and touched the sky in that direction.

When his head finally crested over the waves, he realized he was a bit to the west of the circle of witches. He corrected his course before climbing any higher toward shore; he wanted them all to see him *walking*, not swimming. When Molly met him at the tide's edge, he realized with a start that he was completely dry.

"I knew you'd do it!" she said, giving him a welcoming squeeze. "I so wanted to see Gid emerge from the sea. I know he'd be proud of you." She pulled him into the group of witches, who had broken up the circle and were stretching their legs and backs. Each one held what looked like half of an eggshell filled with wine. The closest took a sip from her strange cup and handed it to him. He took it and drank the rest, which seemed appropriate. The next witch followed suit, until he'd shared wine with all of them. Sirius was glad the group hadn't been any larger, as he felt a bit tipsy when he threw back the last one.

"Well, you're a part of the Sisterhood now, lad," grinned Molly. "Not that you'll notice much difference, since you haven't done any of the required preparation. But this kind of magic is open to you now, and if you want to study it, you can. I can help you meet the right people later. You'll still be able to perform Merddynian magic, of course, but you'll have to be careful to keep your intentions noble and stay away from Dark spells, even jinxes. Avallocian magic is repelled by such things--you'll lose it if you prove to be unworthy of it."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. "Can I get into mischief now and then?" Molly glanced at him askew, hiding a smile behind her hand.

Avoiding the noisy revelry of the village, the group gradually wound its way to a secluded spot in the nearby wood. Too small to be properly called a clearing, it was basically a huge tree stump, perfectly flat, with enough room around it to congregate. The witches formed a new circle around the trunk, silent and somber this time, quite different from the vivacious ritual on the shore.

Molly pulled him and Little Harry back from the group. "I haven't told them very much, Sirius," she explained in a low voice. "They know the official story about last night, obviously, but I haven't let on who you boys are. I think some of them have guessed the truth, though." Sirius recalled the witch who had cradled the baby so reverently earlier that morning and reckoned she'd figured it out.

"All I said was that an act of great evil was performed near this baby, and you needed to know whether any of that magic had *influenced* him. That spell isn't actually very

hard; Avallocian magic is very good at revealing Truth. When the group is ready, you only have to set the baby on the tree trunk and the spell will take care of the rest in a few seconds."

She eyed him nervously, then leaned closer to whisper even more quietly. "That's not all, though, Sirius. I asked the Sisters to help you remove any 'influences,' if we find them. They all saw how readily the Sea accepted you, even though you weren't properly prepared. They're willing to do it."

He swallowed hard. "Molly. You're an angel." He kissed Little Harry's forehead anxiously. "I knew only one way to get rid of any 'influences.' I hoped I wouldn't have to."

"It's not simple, though," she said, nodding. "There could be danger. We're talking about particularly vile magic, Sirius. We might have to neutralize it, rather than just destroy it. In other words, something good might have to... suffer, to cancel out the evil."

Sirius nodded, slowly at first, then sharply. "I'm for it. I owe it to James. What do I do?"

Molly suddenly pulled him close, squeezing him and the baby in a tight hug. When she stepped back, there were tears on her cheeks but she smiled bravely. "Gid and Fab were spot on about you, lad. I didn't want any of these good witches harmed, even if they were willing." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"I'm going to join the Circle," she continued. "When we're ready, I'll signal you to put the baby in the center. The Command will only take a few seconds, and then... well, we'll see what comes next. If you're needed, just step into the center with Harry."

When she joined the Circle, her eyes immediately rolled back in her head and her outline became somewhat hazy. Without her chatter to distract him, Sirius took a close look at the proceedings, realizing that all the witches looked eerily indistinct. He stepped back involuntarily, somewhat reconsidering his earlier enthusiasm for this other magic. Knowing that these witches were tapping into a power completely unknown to him was a bit creepy.

To pass the time, Sirius opened his pack and pulled out the battered currant cakes from the tavern. He shared them with Little Harry, who gobbled them up by the tiny fistful. Once he finished his treat, the little fellow became restless and struggled in his lap, determined to explore the forest floor.

When Molly Weasley finally raised her hand, Sirius really didn't want to go through with it. It had to be done, but he suddenly brimmed with questions. Would he be *killed* if they had to "neutralize" something within Little Harry, or just injured? Physically or magically? Would it hurt the baby? Indecision clouded his intent for a moment, then he looked down at the grumbling boy and clenched his jaw.

Sirius hoisted up his godson and approached the Circle. The two nearest witches leaned to the side to admit the baby. He felt nothing on his hands or forearms as he reached through the magic. Having expected some sensation of the obvious power, its absence was almost worse. Harry, however, wasn't perturbed in the slightest; he toddled to the center of the stump as though he understood his role and sat down with a whump.

Within seconds, the wound on his forehead glowed with an acid green.

NO.

Without hesitation, Sirius Apparated to the center of the circle, scooping up his godson as he rematerialized.

*The Lady's face was as clear as day though the roiling mists obscured all else. She was beautiful, tall with long blond hair, but he knew her youth was an illusion. He could see it in her eyes; they were ancient and wise, almost frighteningly so.*

*"Mae govannen, Helluin," she said, then raised her hand to reveal a glittering knife.*

*Sirius made no effort to resist. He knelt and bowed his head, clasping his godson tightly to his chest. He hoped with all his heart that whatever she did wouldn't hurt Little Harry.*

*"Adarmeleth," she said warmly, raising his chin with her fingertip. "Fear not," she continued in an accent he'd never heard, musical and rich, as though the only proper way to speak his native language. "This is Angrist. Forged by the finest smith to walk this earth, it was used to cut a stolen treasure from the crown of an evil king. It will destroy the dark talon piercing the boy."*

*Up close, he realized her eyes were filled with stars, as though a whole universe existed behind them. He felt unworthy to speak to such a powerful sorcerer, but she gazed at him expectantly. "Command me, Lady," he finally intoned, his voice tiny and insignificant compared to hers.*

*She opened her arms to receive Little Harry with a pained, wistful expression. He held up his arms willingly, though he didn't usually care to be passed to strangers. She tucked him into the crook of her elbow, which emphasized her height and long, graceful arms. She held out the knife in her other hand.*

*"Take it, Helluin. If you would spare the child from suffering, let the pain flow from the blade into you."*

*Sirius furrowed his brow, uncertain how to do what she was asking, but her gaze was so serene and confident, he knew she would guide him if his instincts weren't enough. He raised the point over Harry's wound and hesitated. The green glow was already flickering as though it could sense the presence of the blade and struggled to escape. He tilted his head thoughtfully, then on pure instinct, he placed his hand on the wound and plunged the knife deep into his own chest.*

*A cold wave of pain passed through him with a green glow, then the Lady smiled and vanished. The last thing to disappear were her eyes.*

Stars. Definitely stars. Sirius sat bolt upright, realizing halfway up that Little Harry was asleep on his chest. The witches were gone, the Circle was gone, but he was still atop the giant tree stump, and it was night. *How long have I been out?* he wondered.

"What was it like?"

Sirius spun to the owner of the voice, shaking his head in surprise at the pretty *chanteuse* from the night before, sitting not ten feet away astride the chopper of all things! Once the initial surprise wore off, he found that he still couldn't answer, because his experience had been too remarkable for words.

She waited for a moment, then chuckled. "They told me you wouldn't answer, but I had to give it a try. You were such a smooth talker last night, I hoped you'd manage to tell it. Don't worry," she said as she dismounted the motorbike, "no one ever talks about the Lady. Some secrets just aren't meant to be shared, I suppose!"

"How long?" he finally croaked, his voice thick.

"Just a few hours, handsome," she winked. "The sun only just set. I was asked to keep watch, but there was no real need--and certainly not for the whole Sisterhood. When that green light burst from your heart, we knew the Lady herself had answered you. She left you something."

Following her gaze, Sirius looked beside him on the tree stump. He found a duplicate of the knife, Angrist, though small enough to put in a pocket. He reached for it in awe, and heard her voice in his mind when he touched the handle. "It will cleave iron and open any door; you will need it soon."

The witch peered curiously at the knife. "You know you must keep all of this secret? There are plenty of 'purists' out there that think the Daughters of Modron are even worse than the one who was killed last night. You understand, don't you?"

"Perfectly," he coughed. "They don't call me a 'blood traitor' for no reason." She laughed.

"I've left you a bit of food," she said, "here, in your pack. You can rest in the glade as long as you need to; you're quite safe here. Nothing with ill intent toward you or the boy can come near."

Sirius nodded. "We won't be long."

With a smirk, she replied, "Of course not. Saviors of the Wizard World always have some important duty to attend, I'm sure." She smiled merrily. "However, if you ever find yourself in the dull backwater of Gwynedd again, my name's Igraine. Ask around; someone will find me." She winked, then made her way down some invisible path through the wood.

In the chill quiet of the forest evening, Sirius breathed a deep sigh and Conjured a little mattress for Harry. Whether the tot was asleep or unconscious, Sirius couldn't tell, but after all he'd been through, he undoubtedly needed the rest. He pulled the little teddy-bear blanket from the tavern over him, making a mental note to return it at some point.

Watching the peaceful baby, all Sirius really wanted to do was snuggle down beside him and sleep off the horror of the last twenty-four hours. But ridding the boy of Voldemort's filthy touch was only the first task he'd given himself.

He pulled his parchment out of his pack and unfurled it. So many questions, none of which had been answered--and the longer he waited, the cooler the trails to the answers would become. "What magic can repel the Kedavra?" That one had been rendered a moot point. Whatever it was, it had worked, even though Voldemort still had time to sink a hook into Harry--some form of postmortem possession. A shiver ran along Sirius's spine as he remembered the malicious force that had passed through him in the Lady's realm. It made his stomach turn to know that abomination even touched Little Harry.

But it was gone now, and good riddance; it was time to move on. Who stole Voldemort's body and announced his death to the world? Sirius sighed; he'd probably never know the answer to either question. The Ministry was such a pit of vipers, for all he knew they'd had to draw straws to see who won the privilege of driving Voldemort to Godric's Hollow. The elder Blacks had loved to play games, spinning false realities out of lies and seeing how far they could take their stories without getting caught, but Sirius had no taste for it. He was a simple, direct man, and he preferred to challenge his adversaries head on, rather than scrabble around trying to trip them with lies.

How did the Ministry know about Harry--or did they make up a "phony" Boy-Who-Lived? It seemed like just the sort of feel-good tripe the charlatans at the *Prophet* would come up with. Far be it that the Ministry should admit its incompetence at battling Voldemort. Instead, they could make up some fabulous tale of a supernatural hero to show that really, the Ministry had done all it could. If it took a miraculous force to put an end to Darkness, then none could blame the poor Ministry for its series of pathetic failures. Claiming that a baby had killed Voldemort even had the advantage of exonerating the Ministry from future repercussions. If they took credit for the act themselves, then the next time another Dark power came along, they might be asked to repeat their success. How convenient to claim that a baby had done it through some unknown magic; the child couldn't counter the claim, and if he failed a second round, well, that would be just another sad twist of fate.

At least that they wouldn't get away with it. Arthur Weasley and his few honest colleagues would do their best to straighten out this lie in the Ministry. Sirius knew better than to expect any actual justice in the end, though. After the blame storm, a few scapegoats would lose their desk jobs, while the masterminds would have to abandon their plan and spawn a new pack of lies. But at least the baby, whoever he was, would not become the Ministry's symbolic Last Resort Against Darkness, and with luck would just return to his parents and be forgotten by history. And Harry, the real Boy Who Lived, well, what would become of him was yet to be seen.

All that remained on his parchment were the names of Peter and Remus. Now *those* were questions he could answer that night.

"Except I've got a little sprog to see to, don't I, Harry-lad?" Sirius mused out loud. He could hardly leave the little fellow alone in the woods. Even if he Apparated, he couldn't be at all sure of a quick visit to either of them. There was little doubt in his mind that one of them must be the traitor; he would likely face a duel to the death once the truth came out. "Can't just leave you here, knowing I may not ever come back, can I?"

He wrapped his Charmed mirrors in the parchment carefully and stowed them in his pack, along with the Lady's gift. He nearly strapped it to the motorbike, but changed his mind and impulsively jammed the whole thing under a root of the ancient tree. The rugated bark instantly oozed around the pack, hiding it completely as though it were simply more tree. He nodded in silent appreciation to the Lady.

Sirius picked up the sleeping baby, wishing Igraine had stayed a little longer. "Can I take you on the bike, you think, Harry?" He rejected that idea immediately. If he ended up duelling with Peter or Remus, the last thing he needed was Little Harry nestled in his arms. "Nah, I suppose that wouldn't work, would it?" Harry wriggled into a more cozy position with his head on Sirius's shoulder.

*Peter. Remus.* Tears welled in his eyes again. He'd have to kill one of them. It was unthinkable that either could possibly be the traitor, and yet it must be. Maybe the wolf in Remus was immune to the Fidelius charm. Maybe Peter finally got tired of being the little guy in the group and acted out of jealousy or spite. *Kill James just because he's more popular?* No man could sink that low, could they? And Remus, despite his lycanthropy (or perhaps *because* of it), had a moral center a mile wide. He'd sooner gnaw off his own arm than give in to the instincts of the wolf.

His mind whirling back and forth between two unbearable choices and his chest warmed by the trusting, comforting weight of his godson, Sirius slowly leaned his head back against the tree trunk and dozed off.

"All right there, Black? It's jus' me, Hagrid."

Sirius woke with a start, instinctively drawing his wand. He hadn't been sound asleep, so he remembered immediately where he was. "How did--oh." There were Fireflies rubbing his arm; he'd been tracked. Only Hagrid could manage to shepherd Fireflies in October. "Are you alone?"

"Jus' me, an' me thestral," Hagrid said. "Mind if I come over to yeh?"

Sirius set down his wand, knowing that the Lady's magic still saturated the glade; Hagrid would never have found him if he meant ill, Fireflies or no. A few seconds later, the huge gamekeeper produced a rather tired-looking bun from some pocket in his coat. *Eww.* "No, thanks, Hagrid, I have food, I just can't eat yet. I'm too sick about what's happened."

"We're all sick about it," agreed Hagrid. "Though there's a lot o' rumors goin' roun' about what happened back in the Hollow."

*Yeah, so I've heard.* "I know what happened."

Hagrid's face grew strained, as it always did when he knew the situation called for delicacy and tact, neither of which he possessed in large quantity. "Listen, Black, Dumbledore's asked me ter come an' fetch little Harry there, an' I have to say, yeh don' look like you're up to carin' for him at the mo'."

Though it pained him to admit it, Hagrid was right. He had to settle this score with the traitor, and Harry couldn't be a part of that. But this was his son now! How could he go and risk his life in a duel, now that his life was bound to this boy? Sirius kissed a rumpled tuft of hair. "I don't want to let him go, Hagrid. He needs me. I'm the only one in the world who knows him."

"Yer a mess, Black," said Hagrid in his tenderly blunt way. "Yeh look like yeh got one foot in the grave an' the other on a banana peel. You know Dumbledore'll take good care of the lad. Don't yeh think he's better off safe in the castle than out here alone in the woods wi' you? Let me take him back to the Headmaster, put 'im down in a nice, cozy bed tonight. We'll figure out what ter do with him tomorrow. Or the next day. If what they're sayin' is true, he's not gonna want for nothin'."

That at least was true. Dumbledore *would* take care of the boy--unless he was the traitor, of course. But even the Headmaster hadn't known about Peter becoming the

Secret Keeper. *GAH!* It was enough to drive him mad. *Enough guessing. I must find out who did this, and the sooner the better.*

"I don't want to give him up, Hagrid," Sirius sad, "but you're right. There's something I need to take care of, and little Harry can't go with me. Did you say you came here on a thestral?"

"I did. He's over there... ah, no he's not, hang on." Sirius shook his head; it was almost enough to make him laugh. Leave it to Hagrid to trust a wild beast to stay put in an exciting new forest. It was strangely comforting to see this snippet of normality in the midst of all the chaos of the day.

Sirius held out his hand. "Give me the lead, Hagrid, I could use a ride that's fast and silent. You take my motorbike and bring Harry to Dumbledore. Harry likes it, the sound seems to soothe him a little. I'll come find you as soon as I can, sproggie." *As soon as I take out the one who killed your mum and dad.*

Hagrid was getting misty-eyed, the big softie. "He'll be okay," he said. "I'll see to him an' then I'll bring yer bike back to yer place in Bristol."

*As if I could ever enjoy riding it again,* Sirius mused, then made a decision. "Keep it. I won't be needing it anymore." Giving Harry a last smooch, he Enlarged the bike for the enormous gamekeeper. Knowing that every second he delayed would make his departure more painful, Sirius turned smartly and leapt onto the thestral's back. He could fly south in peace for a little while before deciding whom to call upon first.

*Peter or Remus? Peter or Remus?* Neither one appealed to him. He might find either or both dead, and if not, he might have to kill them himself. In the end, he decided on Peter. Wormy was a friend and cohort, and managed to wheedle them all out of many a harsh punishment with his smooth tongue, but he was never the brother that James or Remus had been. Well, more like a tag-along baby brother, sort of like Regulus--sometimes a fun contributor, sometimes a pest who couldn't be avoided. Of his last best friends, Sirius would prefer to find Peter dead first.

Both Remus and Peter still lived with their parents. Peter hadn't bothered to look for a place of his own, and Remus couldn't afford one with his "furry little problem" keeping him unemployed.

The Pettigrews lived under a bridge spanning the Thames. Their family had lived above the first London Bridge since the 1400's, when it boasted houses and shops over the water between London and Southwark. When the ancient bridge was remodeled in the 1700's and turned back into a thoroughfare, the Pettigrews had simply moved underneath, creating a warren of rooms hidden within the stone arches supporting the roadway. When the bridge was replaced a hundred years later, they felt quite entitled to inhabit it in the same manner, and re-created an even larger home under the new span. They staunchly denied that their magical excavations in the superstructure had done any damage, even when a mere century later, the entire bridge had to be abandoned because it was sinking. When the London Bridge was sold to an American billionaire, the Pettigrews finally abandoned their ancestral home and moved upstream to the Blackfriars Bridge. The wrought-iron arches below the span proved an ideal spot for a magical patio and sleeping-porch.

It took a little less than an hour to reach the bridge. Sirius cast a Disillusionment spell upon his mount, just in case there were any Squibs about that might meet all the requisites to see a thestral. He trotted slowly over the top of the bridge, pausing at the front entrance to Pettigrew Manor on the second piling. Tying his mount to the bright red railing and giving it half a chicken that Igraine had left in his pack, he finally tapped the sculpted pier in the proper sequence to announce his presence.

After five minutes, he began to suspect that no one was home, though he knew quite well that one of the carved seabirds had a magical eye through which they screened their visitors. He repeated the doorbell sequence on the stone and did his best to grin convivially at the stone gull.

He started the sequence a third time when a man's voice interrupted. "They ain't in, you know." Sirius wheeled about, wand in hand, to discover a man in rather shabby Muggle clothing straddling a bicycle with no tires. "Easy! Easy!" shouted the man, backing away with his hands in the air. "Don' jinx me 'ead off, I'm only tryin' ta 'elp!"

"You a wizard, then?" said Sirius, who was a little too tired and stressed to think clearly.

"Wouldn' know the Pettigrews if I was Muggle, would I?" said the man. "I deliver the *Prophet* roun' the neighbor'ood. The Petties've been out all day. I 'eld their evenin' edition for 'em. Lots o' people up in the Alley tonight. Didja try there?"

"I haven't. Are you sure they're all out? I'm looking for Peter."

"Well, I ain't seen nobody today, an' I been by at leas' a dozen times. I fly besides the bridge when I cross, you know; the wheels what I got ain't much good for ridin' the Muggle way." He grinned, revealing a dark void where all the teeth on his right side should have been.

"Indeed. Could you do me a favor, mate? Think you could swing down past the porch and have a quick look for me?"

"Fink you wanna buy a paper firs'?" said the man bluntly but politely. When Sirius dug in his pockets for a coin, he added, "Two tonight, innit? Only this bein' a Special, wiv Wosssname bein' killed an' all."

"Voldemort, right," said Sirius thoughtfully as he smiled and handed him the two Knuts. The man cringed and eyed him nervously. Sirius hoped he'd intimidated the Cockney from simply disappearing with the coins.

The man launched into the bridge traffic without even looking, apparently using the same sort of magic as the Knight Bus to keep from being both seen and crushed. His bike immediately took to the air and he soared gracefully over the railing, barely clearing the doubly-invisible thestral. A few minutes later he reappeared over the other side of the bridge, pedaling over the traffic and coming to a smooth but noisy landing beside Sirius.

"Nope. Not in. Not a single ligh' on. I even poked me 'ead up through the ironworks, to get a good look-see. If 'e's 'ome, 'e's layin' real low, inee?"

"Laying low... could be." The man grinned nervously, muttering something about needing to get on his way. Sirius waved him off as he turned and leaned against the railing to think.

Wormy, his parents, and his fat, jolly aunt (who liked to drop things onto unsuspecting Muggles as their boats passed under the bridge) could have been attacked and left for dead. It didn't seem right, though; if Voldemort or his forces had attacked and killed the Pettigrews, they would have left a Dark Mark, either on the bridge or under the water.

Without thinking about it, Sirius opened the newspaper he'd just purchased and startled at the headlines. The entire front page was devoted to articles about Godric's Hollow. He skimmed over them briefly. Amazingly, most of the facts about the attack were accurate, although there was not so much as a mention of the promised photographs of the Boy Who Lived. Frowning, he flipped through the entire edition until he discovered a small box on the inside of the back page stating that, in the interests of protecting the child's privacy, the editors decided not to run any photos of Harry Potter. Sirius let out a single bark of cynical laughter; Arthur Weasley had done well.

He missed Little Harry already.

Sirius spent the next four hours riding the thestral to every place he could think of, hunting for Peter. He came from an old family and had lots of relatives, all of whom were apparently joining the rest of wizard society in celebrating Voldemort's demise. He finally caught a distant cousin (who was actually more closely linked to Sirius himself through various pureblood marriages than he was to Wormy) just as she was heading for bed at three AM. Standing in her door in a long purple nightgown, she told Sirius that the extended Pettigrew family had gathered for a celebratory picnic at a beach across the Channel... but oddly, Peter hadn't accompanied his parents and aunt. "I saw his mum," she said, yawning, "and Auntie Bess hit me on the head with a peanut--she's a bit odd, that one--but I'm quite sure Peter wasn't there. Why in Merlin's name do you need to find him at this hour?"

"We, uh, both knew the Potters," said Sirius hesitantly.



"THE Potters?" she said with a gasp. "Good heavens! Is it true about the baby?"

Sirius winced, in no mood to discuss all that he'd seen with a near stranger. He wriggled out of the conversation as quickly as he could, declining her eager invitation to come in for tea; her sleepiness wore off immediately at the prospect of top-rated gossip. As he darted through her garden, the witch reappeared with her candle in the doorway. "You know, I remember one thing!" she called.

Fearing this was just a ruse to lure him back for more prying, he simply turned around and called, "What's that?"

"Aunt Bess did mention that Peter was planning a trip as of last week. She told me the name, but I couldn't quite hear the last part. It was 'Little something...' I suppose that's not much help at all, is it? Does it jog your memory at all?"

Sirius smiled grimly, though he doubted she could see him from that distance. "It just might. Thanks, luv."

*Little something.* That narrowed it down enough. There were only so many towns of that name in Great Britain. Releasing the thestral with a smart thwack on its rump, he Apparated inside the public library and opened the first encyclopedia he found.

Little Abington. Little Addington. Little Altcar. Sirius had never Apparated so much in one night. There were twenty-two Little B's alone; by the time he reached Little Bytham, he was beginning to wonder if this wasn't such a good idea. These were all Muggle towns and villages, or just rural zones lumped together under the parish name.

Since it was the middle of the night, he could Apparate at will without worrying about being spotted, but once he arrived, he often couldn't find a single Wizard establishment at which he could inquire about Peter. The few taverns he found were generally filled with drunken revelers and surly, footsore barkeeps who had run out of butterbeer hours before. None of them had seen a stranger, none of them knew Peter Pettigrew.

Little Clevelode. Little Dunmow. Little Eaton. He almost skipped Little Easton because the names were so similar and his eyes were blurring with fatigue. The sun rose as he arrived in Little Finborough, slowing him even further as he was forced to hunt for approved Apparation Points or secluded spots. He found a wizard-friendly bakery in the hamlet of Little Gringley with rich, hot coffee that almost made him feel awake again.

He knew as soon as he approached Little Hangleton that this town was different. A hostile ward threw him off course and forced him to rematerialize in the branches of a tree. Cursing under his breath, he scrambled down and checked carefully in every direction, but there didn't seem to be any Muggles about. Keeping a hand on his wand, Sirius sought the source of the offending magic, finding nothing but a very run-down, abandoned shack in the midst of an overgrown thorny hedge that must have been carnivorous at some point in its lifespan. The wards on it were just as dilapidated as the shack itself, more of a nuisance than a danger, but something about the whole scenario raised his hackles. Who would invest in such magic to shield such a worthless old hovel? He was sure there was more to this town than met the eye.

Sirius hacked his way through the thinnest part of the hedge and found a road heading into the valley of Little Hangleton. Like the shack, the village appeared disused and neglected, though there were still some inhabitants; he could see automobiles moving along the main street. Spotting an empty lean-to behind an old stone wall, he Apparated the rest of the way to town and began his search in cautious earnest.

The main road was completely Muggle, and even more haggard-looking up close. Many of the store fronts were boarded up, and the remaining businesses had a seedy, hard look. There were no restaurants or taverns, or shops full of frivolities like ladies' clothing or gifts. He passed a grocery with half-empty shelves and a hardware and repair shop with an ancient forge and anvil right in the center as though time had ignored it. The only place that seemed to be thriving was a carpentry guild, which had a display of caskets in the window.

When Sirius realized that it all felt like some cheesey Muggle movie set, he shrank into the nearest alley and took a deep breath. He knew he was in the right place. Only Voldemort would be so trite as to use a little Muggle town as his personal playground, terrorizing the inhabitants into bare subsistence like an American outlaw in the "Old West." He would find Peter here, he was certain of it, and what's worse, he might just be outnumbered when it happened. Adrenaline rushed through his jangled nerves yet again, though it did not energize him so much as make him realize how exhausted he truly was.

He stayed off the road at that point, slinking from alley to alley when he could, prowling behind buildings and in the shadows. *Where would Peter go?* There was a run-down manor house on the hillside that also reeked of Voldemort, though Sirius couldn't pinpoint why; there were no magical wards or sigils that gave it away as a wizard's abode. But he was absolutely certain that Peter was either up there, or would return there shortly, and he quickly found a secluded vantage point to watch for him.

He waited less than half an hour.

"Peter."

"Si-Sirius? What--"

"Shut up."

"Siri... help me. I'm in trouble--"

"I said shut UP!"

"What are you going to do?" It was all there in his face, every last admission, except *why*.

"What would you do, Peter? You tell me."

He took a step backward. "I-I-I'd get to the bottom of things before I did anything rash--"

"Oh, you're at the bottom, all right!" Sirius bellowed so loudly that heads began poking out of windows and doors along the lane. "Don't you DARE try to explain it away. How long, Peter? How long have you sided with HIM?"

"A-A year, Siri. He caught me a year ago, I had no choice, he said he'd--"

"A YEAR?" He hadn't expected that--a month, maybe two at most. The thought that Peter was duplicitous enough to maintain a loyal appearance for a whole *year* while secretly serving Voldemort was enough to paralyze him with rage. He brought his wand out in the open, not caring how many Muggles were now watching in concerned fascination.

"Sirius--"

"You've been the spy all along! You gave up Gid and Fabian too, not just James! Did you give him my little brother? Did you?"

"I couldn't stop him! He would have killed us all; I steered him away from the rest of us!"

Sirius had never killed anyone before, and he needed to concentrate. "SHUT UP!" he screamed, steadying his hand.

He never even saw Peter move before the explosion blasted him into the air, hurling him some twenty feet down the street before he smashed into the cobblestones.

Sirius rose clumsily to his feet, his ears ringing painfully from the shock of the blast. He'd struck his head when he landed and couldn't quite remember exactly what he was doing there at first. There was a huge crater in the middle of the street, which helped jog his memory. *Ah, yes. Peter.* He'd come to kill Peter, and it looked like he'd done a

fine job of it.

He didn't remember setting off an explosive spell, though. *I must've hit my head pretty hard!* He staggered to the rim of the crater, finding Peter's empty robe at the edge. *I blasted him right out of his clothes?* He started laughing, though it wasn't really funny at all.

The sewer main below the street had cracked open in the explosion, leaving a secondary chasm in the center of the crater. Sunlight glinted off the current of filthy water flowing through the bottom of it. His memory was becoming clearer by the second. He *hadn't* set off any explosive spell. The Killing Curse had been at the tip of his tongue, but he hadn't...

The last thing he saw before the Aurors pinned him to the ground with at least a dozen restraining spells was a familiar pink tail disappearing into the broken main.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear me?"

"Nnguh."

"He's awake." There were several sighs of relief. Harry opened his eyes, though they were burning and heavy, like a dollop of some caustic potion had been slapped onto each eyelid.

"Dijahsihoohimee?"

"Here, drink this." It was Remus's voice. Harry felt the cup against his lips and accepted the contents. Cool, clean water spilled down the inside and outside of his throat, but it felt wonderful. He wondered if he'd had some sort of terrible fever. After he drank, he coughed a few times, clearing his voice and his mind.

"What happened?" Harry finally managed to enunciate.

Lupin shook his head. "Not sure, Harry. Sirius said you came in his room to talk and ended up doing Legilimency with him. But it backfired somehow... he said after he came to, he found you on the other side of the room, still sliding down the wall like you'd been thrown against it. He had no idea how it happened; all he could remember was reliving the worst day of his life."

Harry nodded. "Yeah," he said, still a bit too frazzled for coherence.

A few sips of water later, his head was clearer. "I don't know what that was. Something threw me out of his mind, I've never seen anything like it. It wasn't Occlumency, I don't think. It was more like an orangutan, really," he noted as an afterthought.

Lupin sighed and sat back in his chair, plainly relieved by Harry's recovery. Only then did Harry realize that there were others in the room; Viktor and Tonks were both milling behind Lupin's chair looking concerned. "Where's Sirius?" Harry asked, finding it quite strange that his godfather would be missing when these other friends were obviously so worried.

Lupin smiled warmly. "That's the good news, Harry. He's asleep."

## 28: The Pitch

*Chapter 28 of 50*

Harry's first Quidditch match of the season. An attempt to heal some old wounds.

"Hey! How'd it go with Bighead Boy?" asked Ron, looking up brightly from a Wizard Chess match against a third-year student.

Harry had nearly forgotten about the errand which he'd originally left Hogwarts to attend. "Oh, he's... fine. Nice new office. Yeah."

Ron ignored the pawn turning his rook into a tiny pile of rubble, while Hermione, sitting at a nearby table before a lengthy parchment, allowed a huge blob of ink fall onto her essay. Ron immediately told his opponent to shove off and yanked Harry into the nearest chair.

It took over an hour to relate all the days' events. When he finished, Hermione leaned into the center of their cluster of chairs and spoke in an urgent whisper. "Harry, do you know what this means? 'The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal.' It wasn't just a physical mark, Harry! He made you into a Horcrux!"

"Whoa, there!" Harry and Ron both said at the same time. "That's a bit of a jump, don't you think?" added Ron. "Okay, he left some sigil or something, but that doesn't mean it was a--"

"Shhh!" hissed Harry, lest they be overheard by the entire Gryffindor House.

"It's not a jump, Ron!" insisted Hermione in a quiet growl. "Think about it! He marked Harry 'as his equal.' His *equal*. A Horcrux IS his equal--it's *him*! That's about as equal as one can get!"

"But why would he do that, if he was just going to kill Harry anyway?" argued Ron, while Harry nodded vigorously.

"Well, he probably didn't intend to make Harry the Horcrux. You know how he loves drama--he probably wanted to use that murder as the final step of the Horcrux spell. Use Harry's death to put himself one step closer to immortality."

Harry sat up straighter. "That *would* be just his style," he noted, frowning.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "He probably had the spell all ready to cast, he was just waiting to split his soul that last time before he sealed it up in... well, in whatever he was going to use. But when it backfired, somehow the spell was unleashed into you, and you became his equal!"

"But Sirius saved me!" gasped Harry. "He and Ron's mum, and that Lady, whatever she is. I'm not 'his equal' anymore!"

Everyone's jaw fell at that pronouncement, even Harry's. The four of them stared at one another, gaping like a school of hungry koi.

"No," squeaked Hermione at last. "No, it doesn't matter. The prophecy only said he 'marked' you, and that's just what he did. It didn't say anything about the mark staying permanently."

Harry smirked with a bitter sigh. "I suppose I can't throw off being the 'Chosen One' as easy as that. Still, it must mean *something*--"

Ron bolted upright in his chair. "I'll tell you what it means! Only Sirius and those witches from the Sisterhood know anything about what happened, and none of them realized they'd destroyed a Horcrux. Harry, I reckon Voldemort thinks you're *still* his Horcrux and he's been playing you all along!"

"WHAT?"

Now it was Ron's turn to demand quiet. "Think about it! All the chances he's had to kill you, Harry. You were helpless in the graveyard that night after the Tournament--he could have had it all over and done with. He had a clear shot at you and he let it go--for what? Sure, he said he wanted to show off in front of his little toadies, but that was just talk! He couldn't kill you because you were his Horcrux!"

"Oh, now that's just too much!" said Harry, wrinkling his nose. "He and all the Death Eaters fired at me when I broke away. And besides, he tried to kill me loads of times before that, and after that, too! Look at that night in the Ministry! He used me as a shield--he even tried to taunt Dumbledore into killing us both!"

"All right, all right," said Ron. "Maybe I'm a bit off. But think about the attack on the Astronomy Tower. That time told his crew to take you alive, remember? Sn--HE even reminded everyone not to hurt you! It just means that Voldemort didn't catch on to you carrying the Horcrux until last year. He didn't have the whole prophecy, after all--maybe he hadn't heard about marking you 'as his equal.' Or maybe it just took him a while to put the pieces together. He made you dream about the night your parents died, back when he was using Legilimency on you. He probably didn't figure out the Horcrux part until he had a chance to look at your dream and really give it some thought."

Viktor drummed his fingers once on the tabletop, a simple, silent gesture that nonetheless brought all their voices to a halt. "The Dark Lord is not a foolish man," he said quietly and calmly. "He did not rise to power by repeating mistakes. Vonce ven you were helpless at his mercy, Harry, he let you go. That almost cost him his life. He knows he cannot play games with you."

Harry nodded, recalling he'd once said the same thing to Lupin. "He's right. Voldemort *wouldn't* spare me just to haul me in for another duel. He wants me alive for some other reason." He fell silent.

"It does make sense, that he'd forego killing you until he could get his soul back," said Hermione reluctantly. "But that's all based on the assumption that he doesn't know Sirius destroyed it!"

"And we're going to keep it that way!" said Ron with obvious glee. "Let him think Harry's his last back-up plan--won't he be in for a surprise!"

Harry stared out the window for a long moment. "It's not that simple, though. *Someone* knows. Whoever tampered with Sirius and Hagrid knows the whole story of that night. They may not know about all the other Horcruxes, but you can bet they recognized what Voldemort set in *me*. They know it was destroyed, and they did their best to make sure no one ELSE would ever find out. They slammed Sirius into Azkaban to rot where no one would learn the truth from him, and even then, they put that barrier in his mind to keep it hidden."

Ron raised his brows. "Right. Someone in the Ministry not only knows that Voldemort was using Horcruxes to become immortal, but also knows that he's one Hork short of a full set. Interesting," continued Ron thoughtfully. "If that's really why Voldemort spared you last time, it means they've kept it from him. They must know it's valuable information; why not sell it, or offer it up to curry his favor?"

"They will," grumbled Harry. "If they're ever in real trouble, they'll take it straight to him." He slammed his fist onto the arm of his chair, turning heads around the room, but he kept his voice low. "All the more reason we need to find this traitor, and soon."

In no mood to do Friday's Transfiguration homework, Harry went upstairs and threw himself on his bed. Krum followed, as usual, but instead of lurking quietly on the edge of the room, he sat on Harry's trunk and smiled at him empathetically. Harry sighed, gazing up at the ceiling. "I'm really growing tired of all this mess, you know?"

Viktor shrugged. "I read today in *Prophet* that Chudley Cannons Seeker is retiring in two years. Perhaps I apply for position, eh, Harry?"

Harry pushed up onto his elbow. "Are you kidding? A World Cup player on the Cannons? Ron would go spare!" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Don't tell him I said so, but aren't they a bit out of your league?"

Krum shrugged again. "Ah, this year, I get out of shape. Too much to do for Order of Phoenix to practice. Besides, Vrastra Vultures have new Seeker vith smart agent. His salary costs team far less than I do. I think they will be happy to sign me off."

"They'd be crazy," said Harry firmly.

"Perhaps. Vat about you, Harry? Maybe you try out for Cannons vonce mess is over?"

For a moment, Harry couldn't speak--that was possibly the most flattering thing anyone had ever said to him. "Me? You're having me on! You can fly circles around me with one hand behind your back. I'm no pro!"

Another shrug. "No vun starts out as pro. Great players are made from good players vith training. You are good player, Harry." He nodded solemnly. "Something to think about for future."

*What future?* thought Harry, but kept that thought to himself.

Harry awoke the following Saturday to a clear, golden dawn and anxious ramblings from Ron. "Blimey, Harry, dunno how you can sleep in on a day like this." It was only hours before their first Quidditch match of the season.

Harry tossed his pillow at the back of Ron's head. "Because I play better when I've had some rest." Harry glanced at the alarm clock. "Mother of Merlin, Ron, breakfast won't even be served for another twenty minutes!"

Despite two successful seasons as Keeper, Ron hadn't quite overcome the pre-game jitters. He was pacing nervously between their beds. "It wouldn't hurt to go in right when they open the Great Hall, you know; we could clear out in time to do a little warm up before the game."

Harry stared at him. "A little? The game's not till eleven!"

Neville Longbottom groaned sleepily from his bed and threw his pillow at Harry. "Now see what you've done?" he hissed at Ron, though he fluffed the pillow once or twice and put it under his own head. "I swear, mate, you're sleeping in the common room before the next match."

In the end, Harry was hauled out of bed against his will by both Ron and Neville (who wanted his pillow back) and forced to troop down to breakfast early. The usual crowd of younger students was waiting in a noisy huddle before the doors of the Great Hall, though they fell into an awed silence as Harry and Ron approached. The appearance of *any* seventh-year this early on a Saturday was a novelty.

They finished and headed out to the pitch before anyone else on the team had even shown up for breakfast. It was a wonderful day to fly, though. A thick frost was melting at the warm touch of the sun, leaving white shadows in the shady areas of the pitch. Before long, people began meandering into the stands and setting out pillows and

blankets, clearly intent on enjoying the crisp fall morning before the match even started.

Harry noticed Lupin as he circled the stadium, and zipped over for a quick hello. He noticed a telltale shimmer in the next seat. "Sirius?" he whispered excitedly.

"Wouldn't miss it," said Sirius's disembodied voice.

Lupin grinned. "I thought we'd come early and settle in--can't be pushing past rows of seats under a Disillusionment spell!"

"I can get you my cloak if you'd rather," said Harry, looking at Lupin though speaking to Sirius. "How are you?"

"Still no magic," said Sirius quietly. "But getting some sleep has put me in a better mood."

"Maybe you can explain how that works to Ron sometime," said Harry cryptically. Krum, who had joined them for their pre-game laps, soared to a graceful landing beside Lupin. "Mind where you sit," said Harry with a wink. Krum furrowed his brow in confusion until Sirius either kicked him or stepped on him with a small thud and a mischievous snort.

An hour later, the Gryffindor team emerged from the changing room to a stadium so packed that poor Professor Flitwick was frantically Charming the grandstands taller, to make enough seats for all. Ron grinned at him nervously. "Right good crowd today. I see the Order's got its own box," he noted, pointing across the pitch. Harry could make out Tonks's brilliant red hair next to Shacklebolt's shining bald head, but only because the seat in front of them was conspicuously empty.

Harry climbed in a rapid spiral as soon as Madam Hooch blew her whistle to start the match, orienting himself to the new height of the bleachers. He'd lost a good five meters of sky to the colors and movement of the crowd, which meant the Snitch would have even more camouflage than usual. Unbeknownst to Harry, however, one of the Slytherin Beaters had followed him up from their goalpost area and was quietly trailing him.

He leveled off above the stands and began his usual wide arc, scanning for the Snitch and keeping tabs on the other Seeker. There seemed to be some early excitement over the Quaffle, but he had learned not to be distracted by the Chasers' activities and ignored them, focusing on his hunt for the Snitch. He was oblivious to the fact that the Beater behind him attracted a Bludger and smashed it straight for him from close range.

Harry had just enough time to hear the smack of the opponent's bat and realize he was probably in big trouble when there was a second fierce cracking sound and his broom lurched. The crowd fell silent, then screamed, then erupted into cheers.

Fighting to stay level, Harry turned around to see what had happened, and found Elias Ravenclaw dangling from the back of his Firebolt with one hand, the other clutching a broken bat, and an enormous grin in between. "Aye! That pat the branks on him!" he shouted joyously, as Madam Hooch's whistle signalled a time out above the roar of the crowd.

Elias had been following the entire cat-and-mouse game out of the corner of his eye, and had shot straight up at the Slytherin flier and Harry as soon as the Bludger veered toward them. When the iron ball was batted toward Harry, Elias was already on an intercept course, but moving a hair too slowly. Recognizing that he was a split second behind the offending Bludger, he had launched himself from his broomstick, just in time to smack the ball away from Harry and catch hold of the back of the Firebolt.

Harry gathered all this from the fact that the Slytherin Beater was doubled over on his own broom with a Bludger parked in his midsection, while Elias's Nimbus was drifting obediently back to earth to await a rider. Elias dropped the broken bat and gripped the Firebolt with his other hand. "Can you get us daen like this, Harry, or should I maybe hand-over further to the front?"

Harry laughed. "Just hold on tight, and don't break any more twigs!" He pushed himself to the other end of the broomstick to balance the weight as best he could and descended beside the Nimbus. Harry didn't stick around after Elias dropped from the back of the Firebolt, as Madam Hooch was barreling toward them with a murderous look. Only when he'd reached a safe altitude did he look down and confirm that Elias was receiving a detailed description of what would happen if he tried something that dangerous again.

Harry grinned, imagining the impish Scot bowing his head contritely as he received the tongue lashing, all of which would go in one ear and out the other. He used the time to shift his weight on the Firebolt; he would have to tune it up later. The tail of this broom was not intended for use as a passenger device, and it was handling a bit funny.

As soon as Madam Hooch blew the whistle to restart the game, Ginny tossed the Quaffle through the Slytherin goal so casually that the announcer didn't even notice right away that she'd scored.

Two hours later, Elias Ravenclaw broke the House record for number of fouls committed in a single game, which prompted Fred and George to lead a standing ovation. The crowd loved his outrageous style to the point of forgiving the hundred or so points earned by Slytherin on penalty shots. Harry, however, was having a terrible game; he had not so much as seen the Snitch. He was beginning to wonder if Madam Hooch had accidentally locked it in the equipment case instead of releasing it.

Both teams were losing their edge from sheer exhaustion and Gryffindor was ten points behind when Harry finally spotted a flash of gold out of the corner of his eye. The Snitch was hovering by one of the Gryffindor grandstands, its golden wings blending in with the flags and scarves of the spectators. It zoomed up as though it knew it had been spotted and Harry gave chase.

The Slytherin Seeker, who had been orbiting the pitch at a higher altitude, noticed Harry's maneuverings and immediately turned onto an intersecting path. Harry swore angrily at himself for tipping off his opponent; he was still closer, but the Snitch was climbing fast toward the other Seeker. But then Harry realized the Slytherin Seeker was looking at *him*, not the Snitch. He hadn't spotted it yet! Harry tipped the Firebolt up to make a steeper climb. Sure enough, his opponent adjusted his course as well; now they were both shooting for a point well above the Snitch's current trajectory.

Harry streamlined himself against the Firebolt for every ounce of speed. The other Seeker was still above him and to the left, frantically whipping his head around trying to spot the Snitch, but he was looking too high, along the path of Harry's broom. *Steady on, now; stay with me a few more seconds*, he thought, *just a few more...*

When the other Seeker's expression went from frantic confusion to a chilled smile, Harry knew the ruse was up. If only it were Malfoy on that broom! He knew how to rattle Malfoy's cage, knew just what sort of trash-talk would throw him off for that critical few seconds. He never thought the day would come that he'd *miss* the little ferret. But here it was, and he was about to lose the first match to a novice Seeker--

--and just then, the Snitch halted in midair and the game was back on.

There was no time to waste. They were roughly equidistant from the Snitch and neither was heading straight for it. Harry had been aiming above it for some time and was shooting along that course like an arrow. But at that speed with the damaged tail, he couldn't rely on an accurate course correction--and if he slowed down, there was no way he'd beat the other Seeker!

With a savage howl, Harry crossed his ankles around the broomstick and rolled off. The race to the Snitch was so close that when he caught it, his wrist bounced off the front of the Slytherin's broom. It hurt like mad and he was quite sure it was broken, but Harry didn't care. He just let the Firebolt glide to a stop, holding the Snitch triumphantly in his hand. Golden wings beat between his fingers as he hung like an overgrown bat from the broomstick, waiting for Elias or Ginny or someone to come up and flip him back upright. He didn't have to wait long.

Grawp was guarding the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, his enormous head plugging the portrait hole as he lay on his side in the corridor. "Hooray for Team!" said the giant with a smile almost as wide as Harry was tall, and he rolled over onto his belly so they could enter.

An impossible number of people were crammed inside the common room, making an incredible but cheery din. Apparently everyone was too excited to wait for the team to be released from the hospital wing before beginning the post-match celebration. Fred and George were sitting atop a stack of butterbeer crates, passing out bottles left and

right. "And there he is!" howled one of the twins, jumping down from his perch to pour a bottle over Harry's head.

"And what about this one?" yelled the other redhead as Elias poked curiously through the portrait hole. "Cor, mate, I don't know who you are, but you are one bloody great Beater!" The crowd echoed that sentiment as Elias, too, was doused in butterbeer.

Harry spotted the Fat Lady's portrait hanging on a nail over the hearth in the common room. Someone had put up a picture of a full case of Butterbeer right next to her. Though she seemed pleased at being included in the festivities, she kept glancing down with a nervous start every time a timber snapped in the fireplace.

Hours later, when the carousers rumbled *en masse* down the marble staircase to dinner, Harry slipped back to a quiet nook by the window. Glancing about one more time, he pointed his wand and whispered, "*Finite Incantatem*." Sirius Black popped neatly into view.

"We'll use this instead," said Harry, offering up the shimmering folds of his Invisibility cloak. "We can both sit under it and talk."

Sirius tented it over himself obediently, but when they were both settled in, his smile faded. "It really was a great game, Harry," he said with an apologetic shrug.

"Hey. I'm glad you came. Even if you couldn't celebrate with everybody else." Harry pulled something tiny from his robe and set it on the flagstones between them, then muttered a spell. With a little puff of silver smoke, a crate of Butterbeer and a bowl of nuts appeared in its place. "Fred taught me that one," Harry chuckled. "He calls it the 'Party in a Pocket' Charm."

Sirius snickered as Harry smoothed the edges of the cape around them one last time. "A wizard after my own heart." They clinked their bottles and took a long draught.

Harry dug into the bowl of nuts, but Sirius only sat and watched him. "What?" said Harry.

"Ah, I was just thinking... You've grown up. Again. I keep missing it. I think this was my last shot at it, too. Some godfather I've been, huh?" Sirius took another long swig from the bottle and continued bitterly. "First prison, then exile, then dreamland. And now you're... Good grief, Harry, you're a grown man now, with a phoenix familiar, and a Legilimagus on top of that!" He winced and shook his head.

"I'm just Harry."

Sirius cracked a wry smile on one side of his mouth. "Don't mind me. I'm only feeling guilty. You were supposed to be my son, and here you've gone and left the nest already. That little trip we took down Memory Lane made me realize how far you've come."

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "Not really. Fawkes came to me, and the magic just sort of happened, and that was that. And I couldn't much help getting older, time does have a way of passing."

"S'truth," said Sirius and clinked their bottles again.

Harry cocked his head thoughtfully. "You know, now that you're here, I want to introduce you to someone. In the Order, of course. Come on, get up. You wear the cloak; I'll lead."

Sirius looked quite puzzled. "Here at Hogwarts?" Harry nodded, scanning the room for his Firebolt. "But I already know everyone in... Oh. No." Sirius sat back down, vanishing under the cloak.

Harry yanked it from him with a quick snap, knowing that once Sirius got away, he'd have a devil of a time finding him with the cloak on. "Oh, yes! Come on. You've only met her once and that wasn't under the best of circumstances."

Sirius glanced around furtively, though he knew full well the common room was empty; even the Fat Lady had abandoned her frame and gone off to giggle drunkenly with her friend Violet. "Give that back!" he hissed.

Harry permitted him to snatch it from his hand, but kept a grip on one corner. "You have to promise, though, to come and see her. I took one poke through your memory and you're sleeping again--and Tura's so much better at it. You have to, Sirius. Trust me."

Sirius glowered, but Harry gave him his most winsome smile. With a loud sniff, Sirius grumbled, "Looks like I haven't much choice, if I want to make it out of the castle without starting a riot. Fine, I'll go talk to her, but let me think about the other, all right?" He tossed the cloak over himself with a practiced ease, and Harry Summoned his Firebolt from the far corner of the common room.

As they launched from the stone steps outside the Main Door, Sirius asked, "Where's your bodyguard, anyway?"

"Dinner. I promised him I'd behave while you're here."

"And he believed you? Merlin's ghost, I've got to talk some sense into that one."

It was a chilly ride to Tura's sleeping porch under the grandstands. There was only a small lamp hanging over a rafter, illuminating scattered books and other belongings all over her platform. She sat in the midst of it with her wand, making small bursts of blue sparks over various objects. She called to him as he glided in for a landing.

"Hey, sweetie pie! Watch out, it's a mess. That nitwit Flitwick didn't know I was living up here; he Charmed all my stuff into a gi-noceros disaster. Look at these leaves--they were all sorted in their own little envelopes and now they've just sort of congealed into one big sheet of leafy, papery..." Tura threw up her hands, unable to find the right word for the amalgam of paper and leaves. "Half my books won't open anymore, and I don't even want to LOOK at the hammock. The nice seal pelt I sleep on became part of the rope, so now the whole thing's just a big furry net."

"Oh, but Harry!" She leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him. "You were wonderful today! Did you see me? I was sitting up on the hillside with Grawp. He doesn't fit in the stadium very well. Elias was so wild--the guy's a Quidditch gorilla! That was SO MUCH better than that first game. I had so much fun!" She jumped up and down a few times.

"You've been drinking coffee, haven't you?" said Harry.

"How'd you know?" She flounced back to the center of the platform and picked up the nearest object, some hybrid of a book and a leather boot. "Geez Louise, can you believe this; I think there's a bit of my pajama sack in there, too. Pull up a wand, Harry."

"Tura," he said, laughing, and dragging the still-cloaked Sirius reluctantly into the light, "I'd like to introduce you to someone."

"Huh?" She glanced at him curiously. Harry tugged at the cloak to reveal his godfather. He wasn't scowling, *per se*, but he was obviously less than thrilled.

"Tura Ondossi, this is Sirius Black. You've met him once before."

"Of course. How could I forget? Black," she said with a cool nod.

"Ondossi." Magic or no, there was a frankly canine growl in his voice.

"Okay, that could have gone better," said Harry sharply. "Should we try again? Sirius, this is Tura, my teacher and my friend. Tura, this is Sirius, my godfather. And seeing as I'm rather fond of both of you, I wonder if you might at least try to get along? To humor me, if nothing else?" His surly glare was met by two equal helpings of subdued

reluctance.

Thin-lipped, Sirius extended his hand after a brief silence. Tura gave it a single lightning-fast shake and both pulled back as though they'd touched something slimy.

Harry figured he'd better take what he could get. "All right then. I'll get to work on this disaster, while you two chat a moment." He took Tura's spot in the center of the platform but kept a careful eye on them. Merlin only knew what sort of row they'd get into if he left them solely to their own devices. One didn't remove the damping rods from two nuclear piles without caution.

Tura folded her arms. "So. You see the game?"

"I was there, yes."

"Your heart nearly fall out when he did that upside down thing?"

Sirius snickered a bit. "Nah. Harry's a good flier. That Elias, though; what a lunatic." She nodded wryly. They faced one another silently for a moment, then he sighed and cleared his throat. "How do you like the UK?"

"Don't go there. Testy topic."

Shaking his head, Harry piped up, "Try the weather."

"Argh!" snapped Sirius, palming his forehead. "All right, look. I admit that I judged you rather hastily the last time we met."

Tura gnawed on the inside of her lip. "Yeah. Well. It's a little more complicated than that. Your reputation has preceeded you, Black. I've heard for years about a vicious murderer, and frankly, all I've seen of you so far has fit that bill." She glanced down abashedly. "Except of course that Harry loves you so much."

Sirius coughed again. "He's, uh, quite fond of you as well," he mumbled somewhat grudgingly.

"I also noticed that the portrait at your house seems to hate you as much as it hates me."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend, I suppose," said Sirius with a wan smile.

"So they say." She twisted her wand through her fingertips a few times.

"Well, well! I feel better already," said Harry, but he was glad at heart. At least they weren't at each others' throats.

Harry and Tura spent the next hour separating her things back into their original components while Sirius offered advice. Each time his godfather suggested a spell, he glared at Harry in an unmistakable plea not to bring up the topic of Legilimency. In the end, Hagrid came by with news that people were returning to Headquarters, and Sirius obligingly escaped with his thoughts unplumbed.

"I ought to clobber you for that," Tura muttered a few minutes after Sirius departed.

"Oh, shut it," protested Harry, examining an improbable superposition of her furry parka with a box of old Muggle photographs. A little girl with a gapped-tooth smile was tiled around the edge of every hem. "I didn't just bring him here to make you both miserable, you know. He needs your help."

"My help?"

Between Quidditch practice and homework, there had been no time to tell Tura about the foray into Sirius's mind. He described what happened at Percy's office and afterward. "I could feel this sort of resistance from the memory right about the time he Apparated into Little Hangleton proper. Well, not really resistant, so much as... slippery. And just at the part I really needed to see, I lost contact."

"*He Occluded you?*" she squawked indignantly.

"No, no, nothing like that. Like I said, the memory was getting... well, slippery. Elusive. I'd been following it for so long that I could follow its path in his mind, but if I looked away, I'd lose it." It was very hard to describe, and he didn't seem to be doing a good job of it; Tura looked utterly baffled. "Then it threw me out. Sirius said I flew across the room, but I don't remember."

"Harry... That's bad! Something threw you out of his mind? What can DO that?"

"I was rather hoping you'd know."

She shook her head slowly. "Nope. Not many spells can interfere with Legilimency. Period. Occlumency can, obviously, but that's not a spell so much as an act of will--it's on the spot, in response to an invading presence, not left in some poor chump's brain like a mine, just waiting to go off if anyone snoops around! Whoever rigged it up was using some major Dark magic, you can bank on that."

Another Death Eater in the Ministry, then. Harry's palms began to ache; he was clenching his fists. "Great. Sirius can't do magic AND he has a Dark spell implanted in his brain."

Tura snorted. "Another excellent reason not to snoop around in there. That boy's messed up, Harry. He needs more help than you or I can give him right now. It sounds like Molly Weasley and the Sisterhood need to take a whack at him. Do the same thing to him that they did to you."

That wouldn't be possible until the Order was ready to reveal Sirius. Which they couldn't do until Percy cleared his name... which Percy couldn't do until he identified the traitor in the Ministry and found all the missing records... and the only way to do that was to remove the block from Sirius's memories. Harry put his hands on the sides of his head and let out a loud, primal yell.

"Ditto," said Tura, and handed him the coat.

It turned out that the photo of the girl was merely the top one of a stack, each of which had to be removed separately from the coat. But it was good work, for it required enough of his concentration to take his mind off this latest frustration. When he'd finished the sleeves and hood, Harry stretched his back with a . "Well, at least the evening wasn't entirely wasted," he said. "It's about time you two started getting along."

Tura made a wry face. "Oh, sez you! Why do we have to get along anyway? You don't make a fuss about Mad-Eye Moody disliking me."

"True. But it isn't as though he and I are *close*." Harry paused, then continued playfully, "He never calls me 'sweetie pie,' for example."

"That was just a slip!" she sputtered. "I was caffeinated at the time! And I didn't know you had *company*!"

She was funny when she was rattled. Harry laughed, setting aside his wand and impulsively taking her hands. "It's all right, Tura." He held her gaze, sandwiching her hands flat between his, marveling at how small they were compared to his own. "It's all right," he repeated softly. "It was nice."

Tura drew a quick breath and pulled her hands away, picking up the half-repaired parka. "This is me, when I was six years old," she rattled, pointing to the pictures. "My

first trip to Anchorage, with my *afatkuq*. He went to some council of the regional elders, something about whaling rights or oil pipelines, you know; the usual.

"That was the first time I'd left the tundra. I'd never seen trees before. Nothing bigger than scrub grows on the tundra. Permafrost. The roots can't dig in deep enough for big trees."

She leaned back against a wooden piling and gazed off in the distance. "I'd heard of them, but I hadn't realized how *big* they would be. Or that they would make noise. When the wind goes through them. They creak and whisper. Scared me to death! Even to this day, when I run into a boggart, they turn into a tree. I just leave them like that; you can almost hear the gears grinding in their little brains when they realize they can't exactly chase after me as a thirty-foot fir."

Harry was grinding a few gears himself. "You're afraid of trees."

She glowered. "Hey, I was little. They were big. And no decent plant has any business whispering like that!" She emphasized her point by bouncing a rolled-up sock off his head.

Harry set back to work on the parka, and when he finished it, tackled the furry hammock. That proved tricky, and before he finished, the seal pelt had shed a fair amount of hair, which swirled into dust-mice on the platform with the autumn wind. It was still thick and cozy to the touch, though, and Tura was pleased with the results.

"Eh, these guys have such dense fur, a few missing hairs don't matter a bit." She waved dismissively at the layer of loose hairs on the floor. "Never miss them. Besides, this is great! I thought it would take all night to fix my things, and here it's just a little after bedtime and we're done!" She beamed happily and thanked him.

*Bedtime*, Harry thought. Clearly that was his cue to leave. He held out a reluctant hand for his Firebolt. It sprang up with its usual efficiency, and he had no more excuses to stick around. Tura had already put her wand away and had her candle snuffer in hand to extinguish the lamp.

Feeling both bold and foolish, Harry quickly put one hand on her chin and kissed the corner of her mouth. "Good night, Tura," he whispered, then launched back to the castle before she could say a word.

## 29: The New World

Chapter 29 of 50

The school year wraps up and Harry takes a brief foray across the sea and into the depths of reality.



Harry was determined to discover what sort of magic could thwart a Legilimagus. This was *personal*, even doubly so, for the spell had not only challenged Harry's greatest strength, it had done so at his godfather's expense. Despite the fact that homework seemed to be at an all-time high, Harry spent every spare minute in the library, poring over Dark texts in the Restricted Section.

Krum proved extremely helpful in this effort. He'd seen such books before and knew quite a few useful spells to persuade them to stop screaming, flipping their pages, or slamming themselves shut on careless fingers. Harry really learned to appreciate him, however, when a seemingly well-behaved text suddenly turned on him after his bodyguard left to use the bathroom. By the time Viktor returned, Harry was hiding under the table, his hands covered with paper cuts. "It's not funny!" Harry had snarled from between the chair legs. Viktor agreed that it wasn't, but laughed anyway.

Despite the fact that Ron still hadn't fully welcomed Percy back into the Weasley fold, he felt a proprietary relationship over his brother. He and Fred and George had no qualms about making the prat miserable, but they guarded that privilege jealously and were not about to share it with some treasonous fink in the Ministry. Ron sat alongside Harry in the Restricted Section night after night, going through old *Prophets* and public records, making a chart of Ministry employees, their dates of service, duties, and promotions, all on a huge length of parchment.

Hermione, meanwhile, was delighted to have her pick of extra subjects to research. She dug out ancient books under thick blankets of dust regarding Avallocian magic, borrowed advanced texts on the Healing Arts from the library at St. Mungo's, and finally located a single chapter about the "Realm of Dreams," which she believed was the place where Sirius had been trapped. The latter came to her by accident. It had been written by an ancient Greek wizard, and Professor Rumil invited her to translate it for an extra credit project in Ancient Runes. Ron had teased her mercilessly about her perceived need to improve her scores, but when she read aloud the description of an ancient crumbling archway with a veil, he changed his tune.

"That's brill, Hermione! What else?" said Ron.

"How should I know?" she snapped. "It took me twenty minutes only to get that paragraph done!" She swatted him away from peeking over her shoulder. "Go track down some more Ministry janitors and let me keep working."

Ron slouched back into his chair at Harry's table. Viktor, a native speaker of a Cyrillic-alphabet language, was helping Hermione identify the handwritten Greek letters of the text. Harry looked up from his *Cogitatio Malificus*, to find Ron watching them with a forlorn expression.

"Harry," he said quietly, "I think I've really cocked up."

Harry closed his book. Krum's hand rested candidly on Hermione's back as they leaned over the yellowed pages. Her eyes sparkled in a warm, automatic way whenever their gaze met, even though their work went on, uninterrupted. She glanced back at Harry once, enough for him to make a connection to her outermost thoughts. Though it smacked unpleasantly of voyeurism, he read her effortlessly and told Ron, "She's happy, you know. She loves sitting here with all of us. She gets a lot of grief for being swotty and smart, mostly from the other girls. Sometimes they make her wish she were just a dumb bird, so she could fit in better. You and I have always made her feel like she's great just the way she is. She loves us for that."

Ron slumped a little further. "That's just grand. So how does *he* fit in?"

It didn't require Legilimency to see that her feelings for Viktor went beyond mere companionship. Harry shrugged sadly. "He does too. But he didn't grow up with her--he's not more like a brother than a boyfriend."

"And *he* didn't make a bloody fool out of himself snogging with Lavender Brown last year." Ron leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. "Mother of Merlin, Harry, what was I thinking?"

It wouldn't really do much good to point out that most of Ron's friends had wondered the same thing at the time. "I don't know, Ron. I couldn't read minds back then," Harry noted with a weak grin. "But I don't think it matters. I saw it coming when he showed up at the wedding. I mean, LOOK at them. Is your idea of a cozy evening sitting in the library with an Ancient Runes text? Theirs is. You know, to her, the *least* interesting thing about Viktor is the fact that he plays Quidditch!"

Ron still looked sorrowful, but he raised his brows a little. "She's barmy," he noted.

"Exactly, mate," said Harry. "There's things you two will never see eye-to-eye on. She's a great friend. Try to just hang onto that, and let go the rest."

Ron gazed at the couple a little longer, then glared at Harry. "Hark at you! You sound like my mum or something!"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah. I've got to quit lurking in other peoples' heads."

"S'truth," murmured Ron, pretending to straighten his hair as he wiped away a tear.

Between classes and research, time flew by for the trio. It seemed that the Christmas trees arrived in the Great Hall far too early, but a glance at the calendar proved that it was, in fact, nearly time for the holidays. Ron's parchment of Ministry employees grew to eight feet in length, but other than that, there was little to show for all their extra efforts. The Realm of Dreams was as mysterious when it was first discovered as it was currently, and even the Darkest texts from the creepiest shelves of the library described no spells that could block a Legilimagus.

"What ever happened to 'know your enemy'?" grumbled Harry bitterly. They were climbing the stairs to Gryffindor Tower on a very late Wednesday night of their last week of classes.

Yawning, Hermione responded, "It is a bit frustrating, isn't it? We clearly need more information if we're to help Sirius."

The portrait they were passing gave them a suspicious glare and Harry made a small slashing motion with his hand until they were out of earshot. Ron whispered, "The portraits, however, can do without," and Hermione looked abashed.

"I can check Durmstrang library during holidays," said Viktor. "Librarian there is friend of mine; I give him free passes to home games."

"Oh!" chirped Hermione. "Are you and Harry going to Bulgaria for the break?" Harry was startled; this was news to him.

"No. Just me. Lupin tells me my services are not needed during holidays."

"Not needed?" Harry nearly groaned aloud. If Viktor was being dismissed from bodyguard duty, Remus must have something even worse in mind.

Seeing his long face, Hermione waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, you'll be at Headquarters for the holidays; maybe Snuffles will keep an eye on you."

Ron snorted so loudly that the marble stairs rang with echoes. "Oi! That's worse than sending Fred and George to mind that no one spikes the punch."

The term finally drew to a close, and with the end of the Yule Feast, Harry and Ron set to packing for the holidays. As prefects, Ron and Hermione would take the Hogwarts Express back to London, but Harry and Viktor planned to Apparate first thing in the morning. Ron offered to bring Harry's trunk on the train, which made him chuckle heartily. "Sure, mate," he said, knowing full well that Ron did this not out of mere generosity, but in hopes of finding his Christmas present early. *No such luck*, Harry thought with a smirk; he hadn't had time to shop. He crossed his fingers in hopes that he could escape Remus for a quick trip to Diagon Alley.

Harry wondered if he needn't bother with the trunk, for between growing and getting caught in various fires, he'd lost nearly all of his clothing during the term. He stared at the small heap of books and robes that still fit, and was suddenly struck with inspiration. Digging around under the bed, he found the sack where he'd stuffed the things Kreacher had hoarded in his final nest. He doubted Sirius was particularly attached to any of them, but some might be valuable. And since no one had seen that thief Mundungus Fletcher since Dumbledore's death, they might as well be stored in their original home.

It snowed that night, and though the sky was heavy and gray, the clean, fresh snow gave the grounds an atmosphere of Yuletide cheer. Harry and Viktor huddled in the chilly carriages with the rest of the students for the trip to Hogsmeade Station, Harry's arms poking out of the sleeves of his coat nearly to the elbow. He'd Charmed it twice to fit before they left the Great Hall, but the minute he stopped concentrating, the blasted thing would revert to its native size. Ron noted sagely that it was a good thing his *pants* didn't need adjusting, and Harry decided he'd better count his blessings.

Great puffs of steam from the train engine enshrouded the station. There was little need to direct the young passengers on board; all were eager to return home for presents and parties. Looking up, Harry spotted the first pair of escorts high above the tracks on their brooms. At least one Auror from the Ministry and one sniper from the Order would be guarding the train throughout its journey. It didn't seem like enough, but then again, any attacker would also have to contend with the likes of Ron, Hermione, and the original Dumbledore's Army. *They'll be fine*, thought Harry, and he smiled, for in his heart, he knew they would.

When the train finally pulled out with an enormous rush of noise and steam, Harry turned to Viktor, thinking he'd propose a quick trip to the Three Broomsticks. To his surprise, Ondossi stood at the front of the platform, just outside the station. She'd been rather conscientiously avoiding him since *that night* after the Quidditch match, although whenever he caught her offguard, he'd glimpse a thrill of shy curiosity before she could close her mind to him. It had become a game, and a pleasant one at that, and her presence at the platform brought a flush of warmth to his chest.

"Good morning, Professor," he said with a warm smile. To his delight, he learned in a flash of comprehension that she found it both alluring and frustrating--another thrill. Both smirked somewhat insolently at one another, leaving poor Krum to glance skeptically back and forth between them.

"You two are up to something," he growled matter-of-factly.

She glared at Viktor without denying or affirming his comment. "I'm just here to relieve you, красивый," she said. To Harry's surprise, Viktor nodded in agreement and turned to shake hands.

"You're leaving?"

"Да," said Krum. "I will return after New Year. You are Professor's charge now, Harry."



"Yep, it's jes' you 'n me, pardner," Ondossi drawled. "The werewolf arranged everything last week. Krum's getting a vacation, but you're not; we'll be doing some intensive Legilimency lessons." She pushed off the wall where she was leaning and strolled over, taking Viktor's proffered arm. "Whenever you're ready, gentlemen; first stop, Ministry of Magic."

"So glad I had a say in the matter," Harry groused, but couldn't hide his grin. There were two loud cracks of Disapparation, and the platform was empty once again.

Arthur Weasley stood waiting for them in the Atrium. He asked Ondossi to accompany him for a moment, leaving Harry and Krum to say their farewells.

"Have good holiday," said Viktor, giving Harry a quick, rough hug.

"You too. Don't spend too much time in the Library."

Viktor grinned. "Is not possible, Harry." He stepped back and Disapparated with a loud crack.

Ondossi reappeared shortly afterward bearing a dazed expression and a sack with the Gringotts logo stamped on the side. Harry eyed it curiously. She thrust it into his hands; it was heavy, and it clanked with the quick movement. "What's this, then?"

"I don't believe it," she said. "I got *paid*."

"From Hogwarts?"

"Yeah," she said, obviously too stunned to point out that there weren't any other likely reasons she'd receive a bag of Galleons. "Mr. Weasley said he wanted to clear up the confusion his predecessor made regarding my position here. He said I was an ambassador and educator and was of course entitled to my salary, plus a stipend for arriving in August to instruct you." She stopped in her tracks. "There must be a hundred Galleons in here."

Harry nodded, amused by her wide-eyed disbelief. "I reckon a bit more than that. Dobby's paid ten Galleons a week just to do scutwork."

"Are you joshing me?" She didn't wait for an answer, and her voice rose to a tremulous squeak. "Do you know what this *means*?"

Harry had been around Tura long enough to know it could mean practically anything. "What?"

"We're going SHOPPING!"

He couldn't stop himself from groaning aloud. Somehow he had a feeling that this would be even worse than the Great Wedding Present Expedition with Tonks.

She bolted for the Visitor's Entrance, leaving him to haul the heavy bag of gold, and bounced on her toes impatiently as the lift brought them up to the streets of London. When they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, however, there was a small crowd of frowning sorcerers in the front parlor, and the reason was all too clear. Large glowing letters floating over the bar proclaimed that the entrance to Diagon Alley was *closed*.

"Disgraceful, innit?" said a nearby wizard in response to Ondossi's howl of protest. "Righ' before the 'olidays an' all." There was a new commotion near the back, then Fred and George stomped through the rapidly parting crowd. They bore identical murderous expressions and passed Harry without spotting him.

"What happened?" said Harry, fearing the worst.

"Nuffin' 'appened," the wizard grunted. "Word is the Ministry 'eard a rumor abou' an attack, an' they ordered poor Tom to close 'er up." He threw his hands up in disgust. "'Oo knows if there's any trufe to i'. An' 'ere I'm waiting all week to buy me Christmas presents. Can' even get to Gringotts. Tom's workin' on the goblins to se' up a currency exchange, so's we can a' leas' shop in Muggle London fer the 'olidays. Oi!" He closed his eyes with a grimace, imagining the looks on his children's faces as they opened their gifts and found Muggle toys instead of something from the twins' joke shop.

Ondossi had turned an unexpected shade of purple, rather reminiscent of Vernon Dursley at his most enraged. "Oh, no. I'm not giving up on my first and only shopping spree. Come on, Harry." She grabbed his elbow and hauled him back to the Ministry.

Ignoring the guard who met them at the elevator, she headed to the nearest fireplace. "Yggdrasil Portal!" she barked and disappeared in the emerald flames. Harry followed quickly, hoping she knew what she was doing.

He emerged in a beautiful room that seemed to be made entirely of pale blue glass, but one touch revealed that it was carved out of ice. Having just stepped out of a fireplace, this was particularly unexpected, but Harry had no time to marvel at the place, as Ondossi was already making a beeline for an identical hearth across the room. A clerk at a crystalline desk eyed them curiously. Harry responded with a shrug.

"Reykjavik Portal," said Ondossi. This time they emerged in a room that strongly resembled the Ministry in London, though smaller and with fewer fireplaces. It was gone in an instant as he followed her through another Floo to a place called Thule Portal. This also had an official look to it, and there was a red rope sequestering off a queue for the opposite fireplace. With a huff, Ondossi pulled him into the line.

"Tura... where are we?"

She sighed again, resigning herself to the wait. "Thule. In Greenland. This is at an international Floo portal. The others were all hooked up with the North Europe Floo network, which is why we could just walk through. But this is the gateway to my country, so they have to register us. Get some money out; we've got to buy powder at this one."

Harry fumbled obediently for the Gringotts sack. "We're going around the world to go shopping."

She wrinkled her nose. "Come on, it's not like we're at the equator or anything! It's only two more stops after this one, Melville Island and Mackenzie Station, then we're in Northpole."

They slowly drew up to a cluttered desk manned by a pair of witches who looked like they could be Ondossi's sisters. One of them recognized her and began scratching her name on the long Entrance Record parchment. Tura spoke to the other witch in Inupiaq. Harry heard his name in the midst of all the unknown words, and the team behind the desk looked up at him and giggled. The first witch added his name to the record, peeking coyly at him as she wrote. He smiled politely, vowing to get her for this later.

"Give them a Galleon," Ondossi said.

"A whole Galleon for two Floos?" he demanded.

"I owe them. The last couple of times I went home, I couldn't pay. Besides, they're poor and we're loaded; we gotta share the wealth." She thwacked him on the shoulder for his insolence and talked some more with the native witches while he produced the coin and got a receipt. "Come on," she said, pulling on his sleeve. "She says there was a polar bear at Melville earlier, maybe we can still see him."

It was very stark in Melville, a single pair of rough-hewn fireplaces in what looked like a cave. Ondossi immediately darted down a staircase that he would never have noticed in the dark. It opened into a similar cavernous room, this one with a large window on the far wall. The sky outside was dark, but an incredible spectacle of green and blue light undulated across the entire sky.

Shocked, Harry's first thought was that a huge Dark Mark was being cast over them, but he quickly realized this must be the Aurora Borealis. It was mesmerizing, the size and speed of the rippling bands of light creating a constant dance as big as the sky itself. Harry bumped his nose on the glass pane, so absorbed was he by the view. Ondossi, however, was essentially ignoring it, scouting around for the polar bear.

"Aw, nuts! There's a bunch of prints way down the slope, but no bear. I guess he found whatever he was looking for and left." She glanced over at him, pouting, then gasped a little in surprise at his fascination with the view. "Never seen the Lights before?" she asked softly.

Harry shook his head slowly. "Professor Sinistra told us they're visible from Hogwarts maybe once a month, if you're lucky enough to look at the right time. They're so beautiful. Magical!"

She snickered. "Silly. Not magic at all. They're science. The sun spits at us, and the lights come on when it hits our planet."

It took a moment for that to sink in. "Truly an elegant description," he said.

They stood silently side-by-side and watched the display for a long time. Tura finally noted that they'd be able to see the aurora at their other stops, too, in an obvious hint to get moving. He was reluctant to tear his eyes away, even for a minute.

"Mackenzie Station doesn't have a nice viewing room like this," she said as they climbed the stairs. "This island is uninhabited, so they risked a glass pane in the mountainside here, but Mac's in Canada. Remote, but still accessible by Muggles. We'll just breeze through straight to Northpole."

Following her through the last Floo Portals, a pleasant feeling of adventurous exhilaration began to mount in Harry's belly. His only prior travel had been the brief trip to France for the wedding, and there he was surrounded by fellow British wizards. This was going to be something completely new.

It was almost a disappointment to step out of the Northport Central Floo, because although it was large and full of fireplaces, it was also completely deserted. Ondossi let out a string of Inupiaq words and stomped her foot.

"I forgot! It's one AM here! We STILL have to wait to go shopping!" She looked as though she might explode, but then she narrowed her eyes at Harry. "Although... Tell you what, Harry. You wait right here and don't go anywhere. I'll be back in a little bit."

"What?" He caught her sleeve. "Are you daft? Do you know what Remus will do--"

"Pfft!" she hissed. "He'll never find out. Trust me, no one will ever know we were here. Just sit tight and wait." Before Harry could mount another protest, she dashed into the Floo, muttering a collection of syllables in her native tongue.

Harry could do little but open and close his mouth, fishlike, in surprise. *One AM*, he thought. *What the devil am I supposed to do until she gets back?* The thought of being discovered by Merlin-only-knew who in this place... whatever it was! Harry had no idea if this was part of the American Ministry, or the Institute she mentioned frequently. It would be just like Tura to Floo him into some restricted or forbidden area and then flounce off, leaving him to take the resulting heat. *I wonder where she learned that*, he pondered wryly.

"Is there anyone here?" Harry called softly, then again a little louder. He pursed his lips thoughtfully. *Well, I'm not going to sit in an empty building for who knows how long.* He strolled along the row of fireplaces and found that, sure enough, it ended in a wooden double door with ornate pewter knobs carved like birds' heads. He grabbed a beak and gave an experimental push, then a pull.

The door swung inward quickly and silently, followed by the coldest blast of winter air Harry had ever felt. A good two feet of snow had accumulated in the doorframe, making a perfectly flat cliff where it had compacted against the door. The Northern Lights were indeed visible overhead, but the air was so cold it stung his eyes. Harry hastily slammed the door again and scampered to a cast-iron stove with a glow of real, toasty flames through its little grate.

He added a few pieces of wood and stoked up the embers into a cheery fire, then huddled over it until the chill abated. For lack of anything better to do, he took out his wand and constructed an impressive replica of the Eiffel Tower from the woodpile beside the stove. Finally there was a glow of emerald light from one of the Floos and the whooshing sound of an arrival. Tura bustled out of the hearth carrying what looked like some sort of animal.

"Ah, good!" she said, immediately cozying up to the stove. "It's pretty brisk out there."

"Mmm," Harry grunted noncommittally. "Out where, exactly? Being ditched in the middle of the night in a strange country isn't exactly what I had in mind for this trip, you know."

"Well, you can't go around wearing that ridiculous coat, Harry." She held up the animal, which turned out to be a heavy fur parka similar to the one she wore. "I zipped up to the Slope and got this for you. I had to wake up the seamstress; she would have been even more grumpy if I showed up in the middle of the night with some *gussuk*."

Harry was finding it very hard to remain cross with her as he examined the coat in his hands. It was made of layers of leathery hide, with fur facing both inside and out, the hood trimmed with thick fur of a different kind. It looked incredibly warm and insanely expensive. "Uh, Tura? What did... Is this for me?" he finally squeaked.

She rolled her eyes. "Duh! Who else would it be for? Now put it on so you can take the boots." At that point, Harry took a good look at her and realized she was loaded with winter gear.

"Tura!" he protested. "This must have cost a fortune!"

"Not really. It would in a tourist store, but I've brought in a few pelts in my time--she gave me a good price. Besides, you need it--you'd freeze to death in minutes if I tried to take you shopping in that silly jacket! Come on, let's see if it fits."

The parka had no zipper in front; it was designed to be pulled on overhead. It was heavy but supple and warmed up immediately. She hummed in approval and helped him into the boots, then the mittens. "Very nice," she said, pulling up the hood. "You look like one of the People now, except for your lily-white skin, pretty boy."

"Are these... claws?" Harry held up a seeming decoration on the edge of the hood.

"Of course! Only the best for you, hotshot. The claws prove that the former owner of that fur was a wolverine. That's the best fur for trim--it doesn't get all icy from your breath. Come on, we've got some time to kill. Let's go for a walk."

Ondossi kicked into the little drift at the door without giving it a second glance, and the powdery snow gave easily. He followed, the bitter cold still stinging his eyes, but the rest of him was warm enough. He exhaled a cloud of steam that immediately rose in thin tendrils and vanished. "So where are we?"

"Come here and see!" she said, waving at him from the corner of the Portal building. Harry stepped around it, to behold a valley filled with the most outrageous spectacle of Christmas lights he'd ever seen.

She laughed. "Welcome to Northpole."

The Christmas trees were not so bad. They were all live, or at least planted in the ground like a live tree would be, and bedecked with ornaments and ribbons as one would expect. The homes and shops were outfitted with seeming layers of wreaths, swags, candles, and so forth, but even though excessive, these weren't too bizarre. What really caught the eye were the towering sculptures of ice, lit from within and below, shaped like elements of every sort of winter-holiday on Earth, and then some. On one street, glassy palm trees swayed to the hum of slack-key guitars, while Santa Claus floated across a small sea of ice in an outrigger canoe. On the next, carved Chinese

families celebrated Dong Zhi by dining on glowing tang yuan soup. Further along, a camel nibbled hay while gifts were removed from its packs and left on the front porch of a Syrian house as children slept inside. It was as garish and absurd as it was festive and inviting, and both of them stared as long as the chill would permit it, then shuffled down a staircase built into the hillside to town.

She took him to a tavern called "Fly By Night" that strongly reminded Harry of the Leaky Cauldron. "It uses the same floor plan," Tura commented as they pulled off their parkas. "Story is some expatriate from London got homesick, so he built a little piece of home right here. But unlike the Leaky Cauldron, if you wander out the front door in your wizard clothes, nobody cares!" She made a beeline for a corner table after hanging her coat on a rack made of antlers.

"Well," said Harry when they'd settled in, "what now? We just sit here drinking until the shops open?"

"What, you wanna go out hunting or something? I can go back and buy you the fur pants, too." She seemed completely earnest, but then laughed. "Of course we just sit here drinking all night, we're in Alaska! Though we can slip in a few Legilimency lessons too, since that's our job for the rest of the break. What do you want to learn, hotshot?"

Harry considered a moment. He'd been able to "speak to" Sirius using only his mind, and though he wasn't quite sure *how*, Harry had an intuitive sense that he could do it again on his own. There was so much he wanted to know: telling truth from lies, retracing altered memories to find the originals, or breaking past the barriers of Occlumency. He also wanted to learn something that might help Sirius, but since he wasn't sure what exactly was wrong, he certainly didn't know how to fix it. He eyed a long strand of her hair coiling on her shoulder and was struck with an inspiration. "I know," he said. "Teach me how to be an Animagus."

She put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands. "I don't believe this," she said. "I offer you any topic in Legilimency and you ask for snake lessons. Are you *trying* to make me crazy, or does it just come naturally to you?"

"What are you saying, you can't do it?" Harry teased. "Come on, it'll be a Legilimency lesson; I don't want to *transform* so much as to learn how it's done. I want to help Sirius do it again, if I can," he added meekly.

Rolling her eyes, she sat back again and frowned at him. "You do know it's not safe for you to mess around in his head?" She nodded. "Of course you know. You don't care. Ai, yi yi. One of these days you're going to leap headlong into something that won't give, Harry."

He shrugged. "I've always found a way to pick up and dust myself off."

She touched her nose. "Exactly. That right there is the problem. All right, fine, I'm not against showing you how I animorph. It'll be a good lesson, actually--show you the general principle behind connecting with people's magic. That's how I help people cast a spell they've never tried," she explained. "It's a little different from touching their thoughts. Shoot, I probably should have taught you that long ago--you'd have been a much better assistant in class."

She wriggled out of the booth and led him to a small parlor. Harry very nearly commented that this was the same room he and Cornelius Fudge had used on the night he inflated his Aunt Marge, but he caught himself. It was a *duplicate* of that particular parlor. And a rather convincing one, too--the main pub had a number of inconsistencies (not the least of which were the moose heads mounted on the walls) but this room seemed to have even the same books on the shelves. Tura closed the door with a soft click.

"Okay, let's give this a shot," she said, standing with her back to the hearth. "This is new for me too; I've never had anyone try to follow along before. I'm not exactly sure what'll happen. You still game to try this?"

Harry had to fight to keep a mischievous grin from surfacing. There they were, in a dark, cozy room with a crackling fire, a world apart from anyone who might bother them. *Oh, Tura, let me count the ways*, he thought, then banished the notion before she could lift it from his mind. *Focus*, he told himself. *You have to help Sirius*.

"Absolutely. Snake on!"

She laughed and took hold of his wrists. The contact made it easy to flow into her mind; he didn't even need to look at her. She was fretting a little, uncertain how to show him the process without actually transforming.

"Just do it," he said aloud, hearing the sound from his own perspective and hers. His voice sounded strange through her ears. "Whatever happens, how bad could it be?"

She laughed again, and he could feel the cynical bite behind it. *Famous last words*, she chided internally, but she tightened her grip and nodded. The room went completely black. It had been dim to begin with, but not like this. It was as though he'd plunged into a cave, pressing in on him from all sides, cutting him off from everything in the world. Having expected a flood of strange new sensations, it unnerved him to receive quite the opposite, and he reflexively tried to back away from her.

*Oh, don't be such a chicken*, was the last coherent thought he recognized.

His flesh suddenly felt as if it were on fire. The heat was horrible; he had to escape it, yet his limbs were useless; they seemed to have burned or melted off. Harry arched his back, trying to wriggle away, yet as he did so, he felt his spine stretch until it became impossibly long, as did his neck and head. Instantly he began to feel relief from the hideous heat; his new compact, streamlined body could slide in any direction and escape it. His blood rapidly cooled until it flowed like a mountain stream. His skin became smooth, waxy, covering him and protecting him more cleanly and imperviously than the thick, wet, smothering blanket it once had been. He could feel every vibration in the room with this wonderful sleek skin, from the echoes of footsteps in the hall to the gentle swaying of the tavern itself in the winter wind.

Harry was a snake. He couldn't believe he'd ever been content with that clumsy human form. How had he never realized that he was wasting so much energy heating his body, his blood? Even in sleep, his body worked to keep itself warm, never truly resting, constantly focusing all but a fraction of his power on maintaining his temperature. He'd wasted seventeen years on nothing more significant than producing heat, a task so mundane that a candle could accomplish it. He would never again return to that pathetic body, a slave to his own blood and the unbearable energy it demanded.

Tura, too, was a cobra, coiled around him, within him... she was him, he was her, they were one being, a snake, an androgyne, independent of anything in the world. Their thoughts were simple, clean, primitive. There was no guilt, no affection, no absurd conscience to bind them to anyone or anything. Harry opened their mouth in a scream of ecstasy, only to discover that their forked tongue was even more exquisitely sensitive than their new skin. Not smell, not taste, but some indescribable combination of the two, so powerful and discerning that Harry could identify every object in the room, and pinpoint its exact location with a single flicker.

A memory leapt to the front of their mind, one that belonged to Nagini, Voldemort's familiar, purposely forgotten and ignored by Harry. He had been with her the night she'd bitten Arthur Weasley, down in that cool, dark corridor at the Ministry of Magic. Though the human found it repulsive and frightening, the snake reveled in it--the complex flavor of the man's blood (though sickeningly hot), the satisfying feeling of penetrating through the tough, boggy skin into the delicate, springy lungs, the pleasure of injecting venom through its long teeth. The snake had only one purpose, one goal: to capture prey. Doing so was a deliciously fulfilling experience.

Harry felt her withdraw somewhat from his mind and was glad to be rid of her. Her humanity felt unwelcome and unwanted in this wonderfully simple mind and body. For the first time, Harry completely understood why Voldemort had altered his body to become more reptilian. It was the perfect form.

At that moment his face began to feel thick and pasty. Harry recoiled in horror, realizing that his skin was becoming human again. *No!* he screamed in Parseltongue. He couldn't bear to part with that thin, clean, hairless skin. But it was no use, the thickening continued. He could feel the buds of arms and legs beginning to form, already demanding heat from his blood, which they would only radiate away. But he was still a snake, he could shed his skin, he *must* shed this hideous shroud growing over him. He could remain a serpent if he acted quickly, before its crystalline knowledge was beyond his reach.

He saw Ondossi's face outside of himself. She was human again, lit by firelight in the midst of blackness. She was close, so close. He could taste her breath, feel the

vibrations of the blood pounding through her veins. He wanted to bite her, to fill her throat with venom and leave her to die; she was soft, vulnerable, prey, and he a reptile with one purpose...

With a stern glare, she forced her way into his mind.

Colors. Joy. Music. Gratitude. Ondossi sent them all back into Harry, things the primitive brain of the snake could never grasp. It rushed into him at once, like a shooting star or a bullet. He was still in the body of the snake, but his human consciousness returned, under the twin onslaughts of her mind and his own, a smothering miasma of thought and memory. After the cold, keen, reptilian mind, Harry was overwhelmed by the complexity of information coming at him from so many levels, so many directions.

No, he thought again, but this time he said it to the snake, not the man. He remembered what it meant to be human, and that was his choice.

He collapsed against Ondossi. When his arms were free of the sides of his body, he clutched her tightly for support. Fangs slid back into his upper jawbone and the venom sacs withered away to nothingness. His tongue, still forked, tempted him grievously with the thrilling flavors in the air, but Harry had overcome the serpent. It was agony to feel the sensations fade, but he knew these were only chemicals. They may be delectable to a primitive reptile brain, but Harry's mind could reach farther than that, and find rewards much richer than mere sensation. He may not operate with the minimalist efficiency of the snake, but the snake could never know what it was like to forgive, to love; to be human, complex, warm.

As his human body returned, his senses dulled but his consciousness burned ever brighter. The cavelike darkness finally receded, and Harry was back in the parlor at the Fly By Night. When he felt whole enough to raise his head, he looked again into Tura's wide, black eyes.

She held his gaze evenly, but she was shaking from the exertion and gasping for breath. It had required a tremendous effort for her to control the experience, to immerse him fully into the heart of the snake, but not permit it to steal him away forever. Harry felt a rush of both terror and gratitude and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair as his own pounding heart calmed and slowed.

"Sweetie, you're squishing me," she finally squeaked.

"Sorry." He released her and withdrew, suddenly ashamed. How could he ever look Mr. Weasley in the eye again after remembering that horrible attack with so much *pleasure*? He'd *relished* being a snake, being *Voldemort's snake*, of all things!

Apparently Tura was skimming his thoughts, as she smacked him hard on the shoulder. "Cut it out!" she snapped. "Don't you dare get all guilty! You didn't bite poor Arthur, and besides, that snake was a sicko! Trust me, it's not just one big 'glory of the kill' fest, being a reptile--it's mostly basking on warm rocks and sniffing stuff with your tongue. The Dark Lord's personal *pet* is the exception, not the rule!"

The notion of warm rocks struck a wholesome chord within him and eased the shame somewhat. "But Tura... I didn't want to come back. I didn't want to be human again."

She nodded, smiling kindly. "I know. It's hard when you first transform! It seems so much simpler to throw off all your burdens and responsibilities and just be an animal. But Harry, it took me months to learn the full transformation, and in that time I could reflect on what it meant to be human and make a sensible decision. You got thrown into snakesness all at once, so of course all you noticed were the perq's." She paused, winking conspiratorially. "And hey, that whole forked tongue thing is totally killer awesome, I'll be the first to admit it."

Harry recalled in full the way he could taste her breath with his serpent's tongue. His cheeks and ears warmed up so quickly he thought they surely must be glowing. Once again, the fact that they were blissfully alone with a romantic fire suddenly became glaringly obvious to Harry, and Tura seemed to be pondering the implications as well. He couldn't be certain, though, because she refused to meet his gaze.

A clock in the hall chimed three times. "Noon already back in England," said Ondossi, backing away from him with a note of relief in her voice. "Let's get some eats." Harry paused a moment to watch her scamper back to the pub. *Always a challenge*, he mused, grinning, then followed.

They passed the hours sitting in the main pub and practicing Legilimency, earning some odd looks from the other patrons. She thought they should focus on projecting his thoughts, since it had come to him so recently. "Man, the first time I did that, it scared me half to death," Tura confided. "I was haggling with Asbesta Prynne over my price for doing her garden. What a cheapskate! I mean, I'm a tightwad, but I'll pay a fair price for quality work. Anyway, I was getting kinda mad and I thought something like, 'you penny-pinching old hag,' except it was in Inupiaq, of course. Ai, caramba, Harry, she looked like a broom had snuck up under her and took off. I mean, she positively FLEW. Well, shoot, I thought maybe she'd been hit by some spell, so naturally I read her, and there were *my* thoughts in *her* short term memory. I think I flew twice as far as she did!"

"You thought she'd done Legilimency?"

"Exactly! Without a wand, no less! But then she started hollering at me for messing with her head with my mudblood Eskimo curses and I knew she hadn't done it, I had."

"Mudblood Eskimo?" gulped Harry.

She nodded at him with a knowing glare. "Can you believe it? I was so mad I almost blanked out her consciousness. As it is, I shoot out her porch light every few weeks or so... Come to think of it, we gotta go by her place later." She grinned wickedly, but all Harry could imagine was the look on Lupin's face if the two of them were arrested for vandalism.

By the time the tavern started serving breakfast, Harry could project words easily, even ordering some bacon and eggs without speaking. "Neil won't mind, he's unflappable," Ondossi had told him, and she was right. The bartender looked up and asked, "Scrambled or over easy?" without missing a beat.

The shopping itself went surprisingly quickly. Harry found quirky little presents for everyone on his list, from books about American potions, herbs, and Quidditch, to a dog carved from obsidian that remarkably resembled Snuffles and was enchanted to sit, roll over, and do other tricks on command. Ondossi bought very little, just a robe and a few T-shirts to wear under it. The reason became obvious as they were packing up to return to London: Harry picked up the Gringotts bag she'd been carrying and discovered it was almost empty, though it had been stuffed with wadded paper to appear full.

"Tura!" he said sharply, patting his new parka. "Did you spend four months' pay on this coat?"

She huffed loudly and snatched the Gringotts bag. "I *knew* it. I KNEW you'd have a cow if you found out. Well, don't. It's a good coat, and it will last you forever. It's got room for you to grow and everything."

"But..." This was more overwhelming than Fred and George buying him the silk dress robes. She waved a finger under his nose before he could continue.

"But nothing! It's yours. Be gracious, Mr. Here, Lupin, You Can Have My House."

*Touche*, he thought, but wasn't ready to give up yet. "But it's too much! You don't even have enough to get Christmas presents!"

She gave him the old Hairy Eyeball. "Who else am I going to buy a present for? Merry Christmas, Harry, from Santa's Little Helper." She turned her back and trudged off through the snow.

# 30: The Spirit of the Season

Chapter 30 of 50

Legilimency lessons. The Order receives an unexpected gift from the past, wrapping up a small mystery in Canon. Harry challenges Sirius to expand his borders a little, and appears to take his own advice as well.

*You're stalling. Finish up and get in here.*

*I am not! I'm just enjoying my breakfast.*

*Piffle! You've been pushing that cinnamon bun around your plate for an hour!*

*It's Christmas morning, for Merlin's sake!*

*It's practically Christmas afternoon!*

So far Harry's "holiday" had been busier than O.W.L.s week at Hogwarts. Ondossi knocked on his door before dawn every morning and kept him practicing late into the night. He'd even had to wrap his Christmas gifts in mid-lesson.

"I'm twenty-nine years old. True or false?"

He looked up from the ribbon he was tying. "False. You're... twenty-seven." She nodded in approval, but the ribbon fell into a jumbled heap. Harry rolled his eyes, tapping it with his wand to straighten it out and start over.

"You ask me something," she said. "I'm having trouble making stuff up off the top of my head."

The ribbon was hopelessly tangled; he set his wand down to work it the old-fashioned way. "All right," he said, "who's your best friend?"

"Sirius Black."

Harry snorted. "I don't even have to check that one."

"Well then, think up some decent questions!"

Harry sighed. It was hard to come up with something on the spot. "Who's your favorite professor at Hogwarts?"

"Horace Slughorn. True or false?"

He set aside the ribbon and peered deep into her eyes. "I can't tell. It's too vague."

"Bing. You asked for an opinion, not a fact. Maybe I don't like any of them. Or maybe I never picked one I like best. Either way, I can only give a truthful answer if the question HAS one, right? So you have to be more precise."

Harry nodded. "How about this: Are you fond of Professor Slughorn?"

"Absolutely."

He smiled. "False."

She giggled behind her hand. "Better! Horace Slughorn is a bottom feeding opportunist who'd sell his own mother for a bottle of single-malt Scotch."

"True," countered Harry. "But only if it was at least 80 years old."

And so it had gone since their return from Northpole. Occlumency training had been demanding and difficult, but Legilimency was *fun*. Harry liked exploring his personal magic. It wasn't a matter of N.E.W.T.s or homework, it was his own brand of sorcery, rare and powerful. The long hours spent with Tura never felt boring or tedious--although by Christmas morning he was hoping for a bit of a rest.

He finally gave up resisting her nagging and found her in the attic. Lupin had asked them to clear out of the drawing room for the day so they could entertain.

"Tsk, tsks," mocked Harry. "Such frivolity, spending Christmas with family and friends."

Ondossi made a sour face. "You had all morning for breakfast, and I already said I'd give you dinner, too."

"Lucky me. Meanwhile you're skulking around in the attic like a great old *spook*, instead of joining the fun. And you call yourself Santa's Little Helper?"

"They're your family and friends, Harry, not mine. And at the moment, I like to think of myself as Harry's Little Torment. Now what shall we learn today?"

Sirius's heavy footsteps echoed up the staircase as he trudged his way to the fifth floor bedroom. He'd been having terrible nightmares since Harry had touched his mind, and had taken to sleeping during the day, preferring to wake up terrified in the sunlight. He'd also done his best to keep this news from Harry, but hadn't been able to get back on a diurnal schedule before the holidays. Harry felt responsible, since he'd aggravated the blocking spell in his memory, and asked hopefully, "How about altered memories?"

Having heard the footsteps as well, Ondossi gave him a grim smile. "Go get him, then," she conceded reluctantly. "Maybe he'll let us work him over together--sort of a Christmas favor."

Like a mastiff being led into the veterinarian's office, Sirius resisted the climb to the attic with his entire body. "Give over! Don't you think you've done enough already?" he complained desperately, hands and feet braced against the doorjamb as Harry leaned against his back.

"Oh, that's nice! Don't even *attempt* a guilt trip," Harry growled, trying to find better purchase for his feet on the slick wood of the landing. "I know what you went through to get that Horcrux out of my scar." He hunkered down for a good shove. "I'd be a... lousy... godson... if I did... any less!" Sirius suddenly shrank to one side, sending Harry tumbling into the attic stairs.

"Great Merlin's ghost, Harry, I can't believe you fell for that," chastised Sirius, helping Harry to his feet and dusting off the film of dust and dead flies clinging to him from head to toe.

"Fell for it' is the right phrase, that's for sure," smirked Tura from the attic. "I can't believe you're such a big baby about taking your medicine!"

*Oh, no*, thought Harry as Sirius glared up the stairs. "Taking my what?" Sirius sputtered. "As if either of you have even half a notion of what's wrong or how to fix it!"

A sensation like a fencing foil passed through Harry's chest. He looked his godfather sternly in the eye. "That didn't stop you when I was cursed," he observed quietly.

Sirius stared back at him agape, then cleared his throat. "Hark who's attempting a guilt trip now," he mumbled, but all three knew the battle was over. Harry gave him another firm glare, and Sirius slouched up the attic stairs. He sat listlessly against the back wall, doing a rather poor job camouflaging his nervousness.

"Tell you what," said Tura after all three traded a moment of concerned glances, "Let me go in by myself first, and just see what's what." Sirius wrinkled his nose, but nodded. "Think about something just before the memories go blank," she instructed, kneeling in front of him and taking his face in her hands.

*She's diving in deep!* Harry jumped over to park his body behind hers, and not a moment too soon. He could see it, a pale yellow force of magic like a wizened, dead hand, repelling her from Sirius's mind. Tura slammed into him with enough force to knock him over, but if he hadn't caught her, she would have catapulted down the stairs.

Sirius sat up with a horrified start as Ondossi went limp. "Morgan le Fay!" gasped his godfather. "What IS that thing?"

"I don't know," said Harry, "but the sooner we get it out of your head, the better."

Sirius peered uneasily at Tura's unconscious form. "Out cold, then. Just like you were. Well. Now I know how to get rid of her when she annoys me too much."

Harry shot him an optical dagger and wriggled out from under Ondossi's body, laying her on the musty attic floor. "I suppose you're off to bed, then," he said. "Looks like we're done for the day."

Sirius smiled warmly. "Eh, we might as well visit a bit. Besides, it would be unseemly to leave an unconscious witch alone in the attic with a strapping young wizard." At the sight of Harry's blush, Sirius sat up even straighter. "Ah hah! I was right, then! She fancies you, does she?" The humor and warmth had drained abruptly from his voice.

"Not that it's any of your business."

"She's your *professor*, Harry! If she so much as lays a finger on you, I'll--"

"You'll what?" Harry snapped. "She also happens to be the only other sorcerer like me in the entire world. She's been kind to me since we first met, even if she's a bit moody at times. And she's never done anything improper, though if she did, I'd welcome it!" *And I can't believe I said that*, he finished internally.

Sirius deflated back into a slump. "Oh," he mumbled. "I see. *You fancy her.*"

Harry folded his arms. "What if I do?"

Sirius took a deep breath and fidgeted a moment, scratching his cheek and brushing a few errant strands of hair behind his ear. He finally looked up with a disarmingly meek expression and said, "I suppose this is just another case of your godfather being behind the times."

Harry sighed; it was impossible to stay angry with Sirius when he was like this. "I know it's... unconventional," he began slowly, "but I really like her. She's not much older than me, either, you know. She lost her family too, you know, but she's so strong, in her own... odd little way. And yet she's frail and delicate as well." He raised his hands, no longer certain what point, exactly, he was trying to make, and saw that Sirius nonetheless seemed to understand him.

"No need to explain," said Sirius, but his tone carried no spite. "Is that why she shies away from the rest of the Order? Because she doesn't want us to know about you two?"

"There isn't any 'us two,' Sirius," Harry said sourly. "I told you, there's been nothing untoward, and maybe there never will be, I don't know. She's shy because she makes people nervous and she knows it. She stays out of everyone's way because it's better to be alone than to be... unwanted." His voice thickened; he had hidden many times under the stairs on Privet Drive for the same reason.

Sirius leaned forward and nudged Harry's shoulder. "I know what that's like. I suppose she and I have some common ground after all," he said with gentle sincerity. "All right, Harry. For your sake, I'll try to... make her feel welcome."

Harry was embarrassingly close to shedding some tears, and he pulled his godfather into a tight hug to hide them. "She has a kind heart, Sirius, like yours. You just have to look beyond the surface."

There was a cumbersome moment of silent rebounding from the sudden burst of emotion, in which both men awkwardly sought a new, safer topic of conversation. Glancing around, Sirius spotted the bag of loot recovered from Kreacher's den--the only article in the attic that was not put away neatly on the shelves. "What's this?" he muttered, pulling it close and looking inside.

"Oh, I brought that up," said Harry. "A few things that Kreacher had smuggled to Hogwarts. I believe I saw a picture of your dear cousin Smellatrix."

Sirius pulled out a silver goblet, the stem carved into a snarling dragon guarding the bowl, which was fashioned like a giant egg. "I remember," he said. "Mummy dearest bought this for her niece, Narcissa, when she had her baby, Draco the Dragon." Both of them snickered. "She liked it so much she kept it for herself. Reem told me Mundungus Fletcher nicked it."

"I think Kreacher nicked it back," noted Harry, while Sirius pawed through the sack again.

"Oh, here she is," he sneered, pulling out a stack of picture frames with the photo of Bellatrix Lestrange at the top. He thumbed through the pile, wrinkling his nose at every picture. "Merlin's ghost, I threw out every one of these personally. I'd have spelled the lid onto the bin, if I'd known he'd go diving around for this junk."

He pulled out a baby comb with ribs for teeth. Harry swore. "That's the comb Hagrid used to track you down! Kreacher must've stolen that right from Hagrid's cabin!"

Sirius gave it a cursory glance and pulled out a few more items. "Eh, he loved shiny things with Dark ambience--and obviously had a knack for tracking them down. I suppose it's all to the good. I hate to think of that prat Mundungus profiting from selling them--but honestly, how anyone can value... What's this, then?" Sirius paused, squinting at a large pocket watch. "This I don't recognize." He turned it over and studied the other side intently.

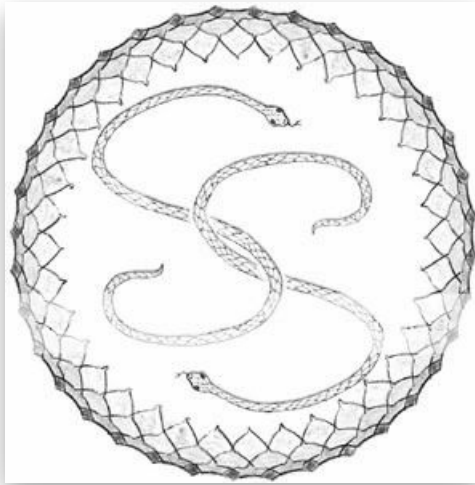
"Hmm. Looks expensive, whatever it is." He pried at the top with a fingernail. "Might try an *Alohomora*, Harry, I can't get it open."

Curious, Harry dug his wand out of his robe and pointed it at the clasp, but before he could utter the spell, searing pain shot up his arm like a bolt of electricity and set his scar afire.

For a moment he was blind and deaf, the world having collapsed into bright white and pain, but soon he could make out Sirius shouting down the steps for help. Jagged crinkles of darkness pierced the edges of his vision and gradually widened to reveal the candlelit attic. By the time Tonks and Moody pounded up the stairs, Harry found his voice again. "I'm all right. I'm okay. But that thing..."

Moody already had it levitated within a sphere of roiling red smoke. His magical eye was fixed on it; none of them had ever seen the "Mad Eye" sit so still for so long.

"Well, now," Moody finally said. "Someone has a right wicked sense of humor. Only how'd they know all I wanted for Christmas was an Horcrux?"



It sat on a small table in the center of the drawing room, as inconspicuous as an iceberg, with a similar foreboding of unseen danger. The members of the Order studied it from a distance, circling it and peering at it from every angle, yet never stepping close.

Harry left his wand in his bedroom for the first time in months, rather than risk provoking it again. He stared at it from one of the overstuffed armchairs with an untouched mug of mulled wine. "How did Kreacher get his hands on it?" he wondered aloud; it was the question of the hour.

"We know Kreacher went to the Malfoys at least once," noted Tonks.

Harry and Moody shook their heads simultaneously. "Malfoy had the diary," the old Auror muttered. "Only a fool would entrust two of the cursed things to one man. Especially THAT one."

"It must have been *here*, or at Hogwarts," said Harry. "Where else could he have snooped around long enough to find it? I mean, surely it wasn't sitting out in the open?"

"Reem," said Sirius, fighting to stay awake with a third cup of coffee, "I'm thinking of a spell James had, back when we were working on the Marauder's Map. It was a variation on the *Aperio*, you remember? So the Map would always be accurate?"

Lupin nodded. "Of course." He turned to Harry. "I told you once that the Marauder's map never lies--that was your father's doing. He spent weeks researching it. Let me see if I can remember." He closed his eyes, flourishing his wand as he silently mouthed the words.

"No, no," said Sirius. "Flick to the left twice, then up. You should practice on something else first."

All present experienced a rare "treat," as Moody promptly popped out his magical eyeball and set it on the arm of Lupin's chair. "Hit it," Moody grunted as Lupin gaped. "I'll know right away if you've got a decent truth spell."

Trying to suppress a look of distaste, Lupin wove the wand in a complex motion and said, "*Indico Solamen*." Blue light enveloped the eye briefly. Moody promptly stuffed it back in the socket, rolling his head to set it in place. He took one look around the room, grimaced, and nodded to Lupin. "Works," he said, but clamped his mouth shut in an obvious refusal to elaborate.

Lupin gave him a final uneasy glance and repeated the spell on the Horcrux. The blue light burned more intensely this time, to the point that everyone in the room was forced to turn away or squint. It finally faded, revealing a smaller object of similar shape but even more ornate.

Harry recognized it in his gut the moment he saw it. "It's a locket," he said, his voice taut. "It formerly belonged to Salazar Slytherin."

Despite the fearsome nature of the Horcrux, the crowd closed around it to admire it. An exquisite bas-relief of two snakes, replete with hundreds of tiny scales, formed the letters "SS" in the center. Mumbles of admiration issued from the crowd; Horcrux or no, it was still a most auspicious artifact.

"So how in seven hells did Kreacher get hold of it?" said Sirius coldly, looking as if he would gladly bring his former house-elf back from the dead in order to throttle him.

Harry barely registered the words. Dumbledore had consumed that horrible potion, suffered until he was too weak to stand, and left himself defenseless against Snape--and all the while the Horcrux he sought was *right there in the castle!* He was dangerously close to losing that lovely Christmas breakfast.

"That was the one the Headmaster and I were looking for, that night," Harry said feebly, trying to quell the need to vomit. "It had been taken from its hiding place, though, before we got to it. Not by Kreacher, though; the thief left a note and signed it, 'R.A.B.'"

Harry intended to add that R.A.B. intended to destroy it, but was interrupted by Sirius. His godfather leapt to his feet, red-faced and gasping for breath. To Harry's surprise, Lupin and Moody looked equally stunned. "What is it?" he croaked. "Who's R.A.B.?"

Sirius raised a shaky arm and pointed toward the Black family tapestry. "My little brother," he said. "Regulus Arcturus Black."

Harry dug R.A.B.'s note from the depths of his trunk and Sirius recognized the handwriting immediately. "I knew it," Sirius said tearfully. "He tried so hard to please Mum and Dad, but in the end, he came over. He chose to do what was right."

Lupin put an arm about his friend's shoulder. "We owe him our gratitude, Padfoot. He's put us a huge step closer to ending this war."

The group spent the rest of Christmas Day poring over details. The Horcrux had not been destroyed; Moody could see the glimmering soul enmeshed in the metal of the locket. Regulus was murdered late in 1979, meaning that he had discovered the secret of the Horcruxes and stolen this locket before Harry had even been born. His murder was not performed by Voldemort himself, suggesting that this was simply a "routine" consequence of deserting the Death Eaters. There was universal agreement that Voldemort would have seen to the murder personally, if he'd realized there was a Horcrux involved.

"Course he would!" said Moody. "He'd want to find out how the lad found it, an' how he knew about them in the first place. By the time he was done, there wouldn'ta been a scrap left to bury."

"How *did* he know about it?" mused Harry.

Lupin shook his head. "Unless Kreacher stashed away a secret diary, I think we'll never know," he mused. "Maybe he started down the same path in the Ministry that Percy's attempting now."

That was a sobering thought. "Talking of which," said Tonks, "the Weasleys are expecting us for dinner in half an hour. Should we Floo and say we can't make it?"

"Certainly not!" snapped Sirius. "Their greatest victories are when they scare us out of living our normal lives. You lot go on and bring back a plate of supper for me, and give Percy my best regards. Anonymously, of course."

Harry knocked on Tura's door before he left for the Burrow. She'd woken up during the afternoon with a headache and taken to her room just after she learned what all the fuss was about in the drawing room. She answered with a groggy, "Come in," and covered her eyes with a painful wince at the sight of the hallway light.

"We're leaving for the Weasley's now," Harry said quietly. "Are you sure you won't come too?"

"Oh, no," she said, swinging her feet off the bed and sitting up. "My head's getting better, but it's still killing me. But if there's sweet potatoes, will you bring me some?"

"Of course," he said. "But I have something for you now." He'd given Fred and George strict instructions on what he wanted them to buy, and as usual, they'd done an outstanding job, even had it wrapped in dark blue paper covered with moving snowflakes.

She sat up straighter. "Well, this is a surprise!" she exclaimed. "And it's pretty hard to surprise me!" She took it somewhat hesitatingly. "But I didn't get anything for you."

"Besides the coat and boots and--"

"Oh, be still! Those were necessities, not presents."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Of course. So is this, it's just disguised to look like a present. You might as well open it, now that the ruse is up." He grinned slyly, enjoying her understated delight.

She pulled off the paper carefully, smiling at the whirling blizzard, and opened the little box. A tiny key sparkled on the velvet lining, and she cooed admiringly before raising it by its fine silver chain. "What is it?" she said.

"A key," said Harry with an utterly straight face.

"You ding-dong," she countered. "Does unlock something?"

Harry smiled broadly. "Yes, it does. It's the key to my heart, Tura." He took her chin in his hand. "Yours to use if you see fit." He leaned forward and once again kissed the corner of her mouth. "Merry Christmas."

## 31: It Tolls for Thee

*Chapter 31 of 50*

Fate proves once again to side against Harry.



Boxing Day began with the usual knock before dawn. Not another word was said about keys or hearts, though Ondossi displayed several uncharacteristic bouts of shy smiles during their lesson. Harry's instincts had led him to be blunt and honest, and now they told to back away and let her percolate. Even Sirius's constant winks and quirked eyebrows couldn't sway him into pressing the matter.

She had him consciously loosen the boundaries of his magic, in order to feel its range. Harry had made such a habit of using Occlumency that it was difficult to stop. He shook his head and grimaced; he could show Snape a thing or two *now*.

When he finally let down the barriers in his mind, he was flooded with sensations, not just from Ondossi but from everyone in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, as well as their Muggle neighbors on either side. Harry immediately became seasick and nearly threw up into the troll leg umbrella stand, which Ondossi had hauled over with a twinkle in her eye.

"Terrible, isn't it?" she said after he had regained control of his wandering magic. "It's not nearly as bad in the wilderness. Maybe we should have tried it someplace more remote the first time."

"You think?" he croaked.

"I didn't expect you to have such a long reach just yet, hotshot. Your sphere of influence is growing in leaps and bounds, much faster than mine ever did. Maybe Feathers has something to do with it, I don't know." Fawkes, who had quietly taken up residence atop the Christmas tree a week earlier, stretched his wings and yawned enormously, clearly accepting no fault in the matter.

On New Year's Eve, Harry and Ondossi sat on the front porch and skimmed the thoughts of Muggles as they passed, honing the fine control of his magic. After a couple



walked by on their way to a party, Harry glanced sidelong at Tura. He wondered if she'd ever worn a pretty dress in her entire life.

"Tell me about your 'angel,' Tura," he said, apropos of nothing.

"What do you want to know?"

*If you're in love with him, not me,* Harry thought with an uncomfortable pang, but he said, "Just... things. You never talk about him, and I can't find him in your mind."

She formed a hard smile. "That's because I can still do whole circles of Occlumency around you," she said matter-of-factly. "Though I have to admit, you're getting better. It's getting harder to keep things buried."

Rolling his eyes, Harry noted, "Perhaps you don't need to anymore."

"I'll be the judge of that, sweet one." Seeing his sly grin, she clapped her hand over her mouth and said, "I mean *hotshot*." Both of them laughed, but Harry hadn't heard the answers he wanted. *Blunt honesty*, he reminded himself, and took a deep breath.

"Can you blame me for asking, Tura? If you *must* hold back from me, I'd like to know why."

She stared at him, grinding her jaw, then turned and gazed into the distance for some time. "It's been almost a year since he and I last spoke," she finally said. "The Dark Lord took him."

Startled, Harry sat up straight. "But your agreement! If Voldemort broke it a year ago, why didn't you--"

She slapped his leg to silence him. "Because he didn't break it! I made the wrong bargain, Harry!" She clenched her fists and pulled them against her chest. "The Dark Lord agreed not to *look for* my friend. But there was nothing in the deal about leaving him alone if they crossed paths by accident! Which is exactly what happened."

"He was captured? And Voldemort didn't know who he was?"

Ondossi nodded, gritting her teeth. "Lord Voldemort caught me off guard that night. It must have been right after he was resurrected--I hadn't heard so much as a *rumor* about him being back. I was shocked and scared, and I didn't *think*. When he said he'd go away and let us be, I was so relieved. It didn't occur to me that *anyone* with ties to Dumbledore might be on Voldemort's hit list."

"Was he murdered?" said Harry. There was no delicate way to ask such a question.

"I don't know. I don't KNOW!" She buried her face in her hands. "He was still alive this past summer, and that's the last I've heard of him. Either way, he's as good as gone. Even if I knew where the Dark Lord was hiding, I couldn't exactly waltz on in and say, 'Hey, old man, you know that prisoner in oubliette number eight? Hand him over.' The whole point was keeping him a secret, so Voldemort couldn't use him to coerce me." She began to cry, though her voice stayed steady. "I know he hasn't already broken under Legilimency, because if he had, the Dark Lord would be dangling him in front of my nose. Because I HAVE broken *my* end of the bargain--helping you at Dumbledore's request. Shoot, I've even taken the DADA position he's wanted all these years. So he's either dead, or better off dead. There's no hope for my friend, Harry. None."

He draped his arm over her shoulder and rested his chin against the side of her head. A low, distant rumble of fireworks suggested that it was midnight, the start of a new year. "I'll work harder, Tura," he whispered. "It'll end soon, I swear it."

Magic was a force that grew at its own pace, however, as Harry was reminded a few days later. Ron came to stay at Headquarters after the New Year celebrations with his family, and he'd consented to let Shackbolt alter some memories just to give Harry a chance to practice recovering them. Kingsley was not an official Obliviator for the Ministry, but he knew the spell well enough to make some simple changes. Unfortunately, they were beyond Harry's skill to solve.

"Have you been taking Occlumency lessons behind my back, mate?" he finally asked Ron in frustration.

"Excuse me, do I look like Hermione?" said Ron. "I've been slacking in fine form, I assure you! Merlin, Harry, even I can tell what he changed; you've just got to try harder."

"Spotting the change isn't the tricky part," Harry snapped defensively. "It's tracking back to the original that's hard."

Ondossi had shown him several times how she slowed down the thought, isolated the discontinuity, and coaxed the original pathway back together. Each step seemed intuitively obvious as he watched her perform it, but when he tried on his own, the memories slipped away from him like water through his fingers.

Shackbolt even tried a very recent event, Obliviating Ron's memory of a meal half an hour before. Ron and Harry had eaten together and Harry naturally remembered it perfectly well; they hoped a fresh, familiar memory might be easier for Harry to recognize. But this, too, was to no avail, and Harry jumped off the couch in frustration when Ron innocently asked if they might break for lunch.

"That's enough!" said Ondossi sharply, and was echoed with a raucous grunt from Fawkes. She glared at the phoenix briefly. "See? Even Feathers can tell. You're not ready yet, Harry. Your magic isn't ready. It's just like everything else--when it's ready to do it, it'll work without effort. Until then, nada. Zip. A veritable Squib among Legilimagi. Eh?"

Harry pulled a very sour face, but she was right. When this magic came on, it was as natural as breathing, but this felt more like practicing Occlumency with Snape. "Well, then, let's just work on something else." He turned to Shackbolt. "Might as well give him his lunch back."

Fawkes soared down and landed on his shoulder, and began rubbing Harry's head with his beak. Ondossi nodded. "I think your best friend there is trying to tell you it's time for a break. And I agree. It's one thing to cram for school, Harry, but you've been cramming on your innate magic lately. That's the fast track to burnout." Harry leaned on the ledge of the drawing-room window and sulked, staring out into the muddy street.

She turned to Ron. "Whaddya say we go back to Hogwarts? School starts in what, four days? Maybe you boys can play some Quidditch or something. I think some fresh air would do us all good."

Ron raised a hopeful brow at Harry. "I'm for it! I'm meeting Dad for dinner tonight, but after that... Maybe Hermione can come too; I can give her a Floo. What do you say, Harry?"

He sighed, abandoning the window and slumping back onto the couch. It *would* be fun to get out on the pitch again, and their match against Ravenclaw was coming up soon. "I suppose it's not much use sitting around here staring at the Horcrux and *not* doing Legilimency," he finally grumbled.

"That's the spirit!" beamed Ron.

Viktor Krum returned from Bulgaria early to resume his duties and help Ondossi Apparate to Hogsmeade. Hermione was already waiting in front of Honeydukes when they arrived, which brought a warm smile to Krum's face and a wistful one to Ron's. They returned straight to Hogwarts and found that quite a few people had stayed at the castle for the holidays, including Elias Ravenclaw. The prospects for Quidditch practice looked good!

When Ron Flooed home to assure his parents he'd arrived safely, Ginny loudly insisted that she be permitted to return and play Quidditch too. "They need me, Mum," they could hear her arguing with from the Burrow kitchen. "They've got a Seeker, a Keeper, and a Beater, but no Chasers! And besides, it's not fair!" In the end, Molly Weasley

realized that if she didn't let Ginny go, she would spend the next three days wishing she had, and relented.

They spent the afternoon in one long practice, coached by Viktor while Hermione and Tura "watched" from the grandstands. Harry had bought Hermione a book of American spells, many of which had native peoples' influences, and the two of them slathered over it throughout the practice. After the bookworms ignored a particularly stunning sequence of moves that even made Viktor applaud, the lot of them put their brooms in a V-formation and buzzed over their heads, making the pages of the book flip wildly in their backdraft.

The rules about the dinner tables had been relaxed during the break, but their group still showed a smattering of colors. Elias naturally was served on Ravenclaw blue, despite his unsorted status, and Luna Lovegood had spent the holiday at Hogwarts as well (it being busy season at *The Quibbler*). Ondossi sat in the green Slytherin chair, which seemed to suit Viktor best as well. Ron and Ginny wrestled an extra red chair away from the next table, resorting to a Holdfast spell when the thing kept slowly slinking back to its original spot.

The next morning, Harry-and-Viktor, Ron, and Hermione arrived at the pitch first and met Ondossi, looking like a Muggle spy in her dark glasses. Krum was in a jovial mood for some reason, and complained that the girls hadn't been involved enough in yesterday's practice. "Vat good is having audience ven they do not vatch?" he teased.

"I thought you played for the love of sport," countered Hermione. "Don't tell me you go up there just to show off."

"Showing off?" said Viktor, pulling her by the arm to the back of his broom. "Get on broom, and I teach you about showing off." She laughed and tugged away, but Krum held firm.

Luna drifted into the stadium at that point, and clapped her hands. "I'll show off! That sounds like great fun!" But instead of displacing Hermione, she ran over to Ron and promptly parked herself up against his back. "Mount up!" she laughed. Ron raised a speculative brow, then grinned and summoned his broom. Seconds later, the two of them were airborne, both howling with laughter as Ron struggled to level off.

Krum pointed at them and glowered at Hermione. "See? Luna is not afraid."

"Afraid!" squawked Hermione, making both Viktor and Harry cringe. "I can do anything you can do, you big poser!" She hopped lightly over the back of Krum's broom and slapped his shoulder as one might spur a horse. "Giddyap, flyboy!" she bellowed, nearly lurching off the back when Viktor complied. He did a quick, steep loop and returned to float at arm's length above Harry.

"High game, girl-on-broom?" he said, tossing his head toward Ondossi.

Tura backed away, waving her hands. "No. No. Absolutely not."

Hermione waved at her playfully. "Oh, come on, Professor." Her eyes sparkled as Krum grinned and set off on another loop.

Ondossi was turning pale watching Hermione and Krum laugh as his broom suddenly veered when she shifted her weight. "Don't you trust me?" Harry asked, pulling her wrist playfully.

She cleared her throat, but her voice was still gravelly. "Oh, I trust you, all right. That you'll go bonkers the minute you see that flappy bug thing."

"Of course I will! That's the game!" He leaped off the Firebolt so he could stand and face her properly. "You know what I mean, Tura. I won't let you fall off." He peered warmly into her eyes and placed his next words into her mind. *Believe in me, Tura. Hold onto me and know that I'll protect you, and you just might have a bit of fun.*

Both her jaw and gaze dropped, and she stared hard at the broomstick hovering steadfastly beside him. "Fun," she finally mumbled. "Flying's never been my idea of fun."

A snowball splattered against Harry's head, making both of them jump. Harry whirled to face the culprits, bobbing ten feet away on Krum's broom. Hermione, looking utterly scandalized, immediately began pummeling Krum, who laughed heartily and pitched the broomstick so that she was forced to grab his shoulders to stay on. "Move, you two! In the air!" he called. "Stalling von't save you." Krum scooped up some more snow and kicked off the ground in earnest, though the ascent was shallow and less graceful than his usual style.

Harry mounted his broom and turned back to Ondossi with an infectious grin. "I can't let him get away with that, now get on Besides, with your aim, we'll clobber them!"

"Harry..." she said pleadingly.

*You can do it.* He chuckled. "Think of it as our next lesson. Except I'm the teacher for a change."

She scowled but her shoulders dropped in defeat. "You buck around like that Bulgarian maniac, and I'll chunder all over your back," she warned.

Harry lowered the end of the broom so she could step over it easily, and pulled her arms tight around his middle. "Don't close your eyes. Look at the horizon if you get queasy. Ready?"

"No," she sighed in glum resignation.

"Great! Here we go!" Harry kicked off the ground, already braced for her initial viselike grip.

They climbed quickly to Ron and Luna's altitude. The two of them were hovering and laughing uproariously over Merlin-only-knew what. Harry would have joined in, but he had no breath to spare until Ondossi eased off. "What?" he asked, trying to use his normal voice, but it came out a bit squeaky despite his efforts.

"She's tickling me!" Ron's face was red all the way out to his ears, and it seemed that his grin would soon reach them as well.

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Luna let go of Ron's waist and began tickling him in earnest. "See, *this* is tickling, Ron." The broom began to jump erratically in accordance with Ron's desperate thrashing, to the point that even Harry began to worry about their safety.

"STOP! Stop! You're going to kill us both!" howled Ron, who gave up controlling the broomstick in favor of grabbing both of Luna's hands and forcing them away from his ribs. "You really are Loony Luna, you know that?" he panted.

"I've always known that. You're just now catching on?" said Luna, with such cheerful confidence that all three of them caught their breath and regarded her fondly. Luna blinked and peered back at each of them in confusion. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing," mumbled Harry, as Ron cautiously brought her hands back in and set them firmly on his hipbones.

"Stay right there, silly, and don't touch my sides anymore!"

"All right, Ron, I'll do my best. I wasn't aware you were so ticklish, you know. You should have mentioned it earlier..."

Harry left them to discuss the logistics of remaining broom-bound. "I'm not ticklish," he reassured her over his shoulder.

"Good thing," Ondossi croaked, loosening her hold ever so slightly.

Harry flew to the middle of the pitch and began a wide, slow, spiraling climb. The top of Ondossi's head barely reached his shoulders, leaving him free to tip his own head back without butting her. He did so, letting the sharp winter air work its will on his untidy hair but closing his eyes to keep its sting away. It was a rare opportunity to fly "blind" on the Quidditch pitch, and he trusted that Viktor Krum had the good sense to avoid ramming into them. Harry didn't need to worry about Ron, as he could hear his best friend laughing and bickering rambunctiously with Luna far below.

When their voices were nothing but a faint drone, Harry leaned forward on the broomstick, leveling into a graceful curve. He opened his eyes and took in a view so bright and beautiful that he pulled the broom to a sharp halt. Ondossi let out a little yelp and Harry realized that her face was completely buried between his shoulder blades. "Tura, look at this. It's incredible!"

She shook her head, not raising it from his cloak; he heard a muffled, "Thanks, no." Harry responded by shaking his own head in exasperation. He took a deep breath and *pushed* the image of the valley into her consciousness. Ondossi jerked in surprise, then finally, grudgingly, raised her head.

"Wow."

Harry smirked. "Told you." His words became a puff of steam and disappeared.

They sat for a moment in mid-air, watching smoke rise from the chimneys of Hogsmeade as the snowy rooftops glittered with tiny sparkles of all colors. A Muggle jet had left a contrail overhead, and it appeared to point straight down from the top of the sky at the Wizard village like an exclamation point. Harry impulsively placed Ondossi's hand over his heart and, for a brief moment, held it flat and warm against his chest.

"Do you trust me?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated, and Harry could feel her jaw tensing as she pressed against his shoulder. "I guess I must," she finally confessed. "I wouldn't have climbed on the broom in the first place if I didn't."

"Yes," he said, squeezing her fingers. "Ready to do some serious flying?"

Ondossi shuddered, but she held her head high and secured her grip around his middle once again. "I was born ready," she growled, making Harry laugh out loud. Bracing himself for another death grip, he leaned to the right and brought the Firebolt into a roll, sending them into an easy dive, slow and gentle by his standards.

He was pleased at how well she handled it. Even after they'd dropped 100 meters, she hadn't squeezed the air out of his chest, though her face was once again buried between his scapulae. "Tura, you *really, really* ought to keep looking; you're going to be seasick if you don't."

"You do the flying and I'll look when I'm good and ready," she whimpered.

"It's not whether you're ready that I'm worried about, it's your breakfast! At least look at my back, if you can't watch the horizon." She snarled something unintelligible, but raised her head. "Good girl! We'll try some turns." He picked up a bit of speed and wove a few figures-of-eight, once again impressed by the Firebolt's handling with an added passenger. Ron and Luna were attempting similar maneuvers below them, the tail of the Cleansweep yawing sluggishly around every turn.

Harry had just realized that he hadn't seen Krum's broom in a while when Viktor and Hermione buzzed past them at high speed, barely an arm's length away. That proved too much for Ondossi, although he was pleased that she didn't react by crushing the wind out of him, but by attempting her old standby of climbing onto his head. Laughing, he kept the broom steady until she realized the futility of that effort and settled back down, pressing against him even more firmly than before. "Harry," she said, her voice high-pitched and squeaky, "we have *got* to crush that so-and-so."

"That's more like it!" he said, and leaned forward to pick up speed.

Harry trailed Krum in a wide orbit of the stadium, contemplating the best way to exact revenge for both the snowball and the fly-by. As they swung about to face the castle, he noticed two more figures just entering the pitch. Ginny's red hair was unmistakable despite her little hat with a pompom on top. The other, standing atop two broomsticks like skis and gliding precariously about a yard over her head, could only be Elias Ravenclaw. Harry smirked at Krum's back and postponed his vengeance temporarily, diving down to greet the newcomers.

"What's all this, then?" called Elias cheerfully, half-leaping, half-falling from his brooms and sinking to mid-thigh in the snow.

"Ah, you know Viktor," said Harry. "He wanted to make the game a little more challenging."

"Doubles Quidditch!" said Elias with a wink, but as he took a step, he yelped and turned around. His boot remained stuck in the snowdrift. He twisted his hand in a graceful gesture and the boot hopped out of the hole with a spray of snow. Harry and Ginny both gasped at his effortless use of silent, wandless magic. Even though they'd seen him do such things many times, it was always impressive. And as usual, Elias shook his head modestly and gave them a dismissive wave as he reached for the boot. "Well, what d'ya say, lovely lady? Care to be a dead weight for me?"

Ginny's admiration immediately reconfigured to affront. "Dead weight! Here's a thought: *You* get on the back, and we'll see who can really fly a broom around here!" She held her broom as though it was a mere cleaning implement and rapidly swept snow onto his stocking foot.

Laughing, Harry recognized an impending snowball fight and climbed to a safer altitude. "You two come join us when you work out the details, eh?" he said, and rocketed over the stands before he remembered Ondossi was on board. He began to slow down, but realized with surprise that she wasn't gripping him for dear life. "All's well back there, Tura?" he asked.

"Yeah!" She sounded stunned by her own admission. Harry smiled and leaned further into the broom.

Hours later, the brilliant winter sun had all of them dazed and teary-eyed. Their fingers and toes were numb, their faces ached from the cold, and their hair had been whipped into impossible tangles by the wind. Every broomstick had wiped out into a snowbank at least once, and the Snitch was long forgotten in lieu of raids, parries, and assaults on one another with both snowballs and playful hexes. They were having the time of their lives, and not one of them wanted to stop. Hunger and thirst finally drove them to the ground.

Krum landed first, gliding to a gentle stop in the center of the pitch and leaping from his broomstick to offer his hand to Hermione like a proper gentleman. Elias, who had traded the pilot's seat with Ginny several times throughout the afternoon, made quite a show of doing the same, halting his broom right beside Krum's and making a sweeping bow to both ladies before helping Ginny dismount. Though she clearly needed no such help, she smirked and accepted his arm. Harry naturally put on a similar performance, but Ron disrupted the rhythm, skidding past the other brooms with a high-pitched whine coming from his Cleansweep. They came to such an abrupt halt that Luna launched over his head and vanished completely in a snowdrift. All of them broke into an alarmed run, but Luna's head popped out of the top of the drift like a groundhog, howling with laughter.

"Luna!" shouted Ron, his voice an unlikely mixture of concern and relief.

"I bet I'm the only *girl* that's ever been thrown at *snow*!" she squealed.

As the laughter subsided, Krum Summoned the neglected Snitch and Ron looked over his broomstick with a frown. "I guess we overworked it a bit," said Ron sheepishly.

"We can service it later," Harry said. "Right now I'm starving! I can't wait 'til dinner; let's go into Hogsmeade."

There was a chorus of enthusiastic agreement, and Ondossi's face lit up. "And I'm buying! HAH! I've never said that before in my whole life!" She patted down her robes for her wand and pointed it toward her sleeping platform. "*Accio abbiteaq!*" she said, which turned all of their heads but Harry's; he'd heard her speak her native tongue enough to know this was an Inupiaq word. A small leather knapsack hurtled through the stands, literally, bringing some splintered wood along with it. "Oops," she gulped.

Keeping a straight face, Harry said, "Allow me," and cast a *Reparo* charm as the others snickered behind their scarves.

A lengthy argument ensued as they walked to Hogsmeade as to where they should go, but Ondossi wouldn't hear of a trip to Honeyduke's. "You *gussuks* and your candy--it's a wonder your teeth last more than ten years."

"Heavens above, it's like going out with Mum and Dad!" said Hermione, who then had to explain to Elias that her parents were dentists. The ladies communally decided on Madame Puddifoot's for hot tea and cake, though the boys grumbled about their preference for the Three Broomsticks all the way to the door.

Harry's memories of the tea shop were far from pleasant. He'd only been there with Cho Chang and every one of those visits had ended in disaster. He didn't realize until he stepped inside that there wasn't a single large table in the whole shop; they were all small, round affairs for two. The other fellows obviously had the same insight at the same time and glanced uncertainly at one another, but the girls didn't even stop chattering as each took a seat at one of four adjacent tables encrusted with frills and curlicues. Shrugging, each male dutifully followed his broom-mate and plopped in resignation onto a spindly chair.

Hot soup and tea focused everyone's attention to the bowls in front of them, and by the time the cake arrived, the cozy atmosphere of the place had taken its toll. Despite spending the day crushed together on broomsticks, there was a certain understated intimacy about bumping knees underneath a small table, and each pair settled into a quiet conversation. Harry watched Ondossi add lemon to her tea, twisting the little wedge to wring the juice from it. "You like sour things, don't you?" he asked.

"Mmm," she grunted. "I like fruit. No lemon trees in Barrow. Citrus was always expensive, so I didn't get to eat it very often. When I did, it seemed so exotic, you know--coming from a place where it was always sunny and warm." She giggled at some unknown memory, gazing into her teacup.

Harry nodded. "My aunt and uncle used to eat things that looked so good, but I was stuck with a bowl of cereal most of the time. Once in a while I'd get some scraps--there wasn't much left after Uncle Vernon and Dudley plowed through a meal."

Ondossi's eyes narrowed with contempt. "Rotten people."

Harry shrugged off her comment, not particularly eager to defend them. "There was one time they took me along to a posh restaurant. I don't know why; they usually left me at home, but maybe they couldn't get a babysitter. Anyway, I read every word on the menu, every description; it was like a dream come true, all those wonderful things. I literally drooled on the menu and didn't even realize it until I got to the bottom and found some drops on it. I was so scared that the restaurant people would be angry. I'm pretty sure *now* that I worked some magic to dry it off, though that was before I even knew I was a wizard.

"I wanted one of everything, you can imagine, but when she came to take our order, Uncle Vernon just yanked the menu out of my hand and said, 'He'll have the soup du jour.' That was the cheapest thing you could order, of course. I nearly started crying, but I'd be sent out to wait in the car and have nothing! I remember telling myself that it came with bread, maybe I could fill up on bread, not leave hungry."

Harry sighed, gritting his teeth. "Well. When the server brought the soup, I reached for it, to help her set it down. I was on the far side of the table, you see, and she had to pass it over Uncle Vernon, which was quite a stretch. Just as I took hold of the rim, Dudley kicked me--hard, in the shin--and I jumped and upset the bowl, and soup went all down my front.

"Morgan le Fay, you'd have thought I'd dumped boiling lava straight onto my aunt and uncle! The manager came out to see what all the shrieking was about. But I got the shock of my life, because when Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia finally stopped for breath and I could hear the server, she was saying it was all her fault! She told everyone, even the manager, that she'd dropped it on me, and asked Aunt Petunia if she could take me to the lavatory and help me clean up. My aunt was more than happy to let someone else look after me while *they* ate their steaks at a new, clean table.

"She led me back to the staff bathroom (I thought she was going to make me go in the *ladies'* room, which would have been worse than death, I think) and helped me wash out my shirt with soap. She told me she'd be right back, and I should twist it really well to wring out all the water. It was soaked, and once I twisted it, it was soaked AND creased, but I did as she said.

"She came back with... Merlin, I can't even describe it! A whole tray of food, soup and salad and little cuts of meat. At first I thought, 'My goodness, I wonder if the customers know that she brings food into the bathroom before serving it,' but then she just took my shirt from me and said, 'Get going, or you won't finish your dinner before this is dry.' I just stared and stared--it was like my mind had disconnected from the shock. I had to ask if all that food was really for me. Then I started gobbling as fast as I could get my hands on it!

"They had a little electric dryer on the wall, instead of towels--you hold your hands underneath and it blows hot air onto them. She held my shirt under it while I ate. She talked to me, over the noise of the dryer. She said she'd seen the look in Dudley's eyes when I reached for the soup, and how he'd gloated after it spilled, and put two and two together. She said, 'I know what it's like to be the black sheep,' which I didn't understand at the time, but I looked it up in the dictionary that night. When the shirt was only a bit damp, she helped me put it back on and straighten it up, and took me back out to my aunt and uncle. I reckon she must have bought my dinner with her own money. I never even thanked her."

Harry looked up from the fork he'd been twirling on the table and found to his horror that Ondossi's face was tear-streaked; he had a flashback of Cho Chang and wondered if the tea shop was cursed. At least this time he *knew* why she was crying, though he was just as lost about what he should do about it, here in full view. "Hey," he finally said, for lack of a better idea.

"Don't sweat it, Harry," she said, wiping her cheeks with her palms. "I'm just mad. How could anyone treat a sweet little boy like that? My people always made sure I was fed, just because I'm Inupiaq. You were *blood*, her own nephew..."

Ondossi clamped her mouth shut and for an instant, her throat stretched and flattened. Alarmed, Harry took her wrists firmly, instinctively hoping that she couldn't morph into a cobra if her limbs couldn't retract. Just as suddenly, she snapped back to her normal appearance, averting her eyes sheepishly. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "Got a little carried away."

Harry smiled reassuringly. "It's all water under the bridge, Tura. No need to snake out on my account."

She peeked back up at him with an anxious giggle. "If I did, they'd never let me eat in here again, huh?"

Harry softened his grip and looked down at their hands upon the table. Her skin was the color of a pecan shell, reddish brown and ruddy, making his own hands appear quite pale in comparison. The rest of the shop vanished from his senses as he studied the many contrasts in the shape, size, and texture of her hands, first with his eyes, then with slow, deliberate tracings of his fingers. Harry gently turned her hands over and placed them on the tablecloth, running his fingertips across her palms, first the right, then the left.

It suddenly occurred to him that the "proper" moment to let go had come and gone some time ago, and he looked up at her with a pang of anxiety. Finding that she, too, was focused completely on their hands made him feel bolder. Returning his gaze to the tabletop, he gave in to the impulse to explore further, slipping his fingers between hers and stroking her with his thumbs. When her breath became shaky, he leaned forward, catching her eye as she looked up at the movement.

"Tura."

"Harry."

Neither had spoken any louder than the barest of whispers, but it was enough; she snapped out of her internal reverie as though a barrel of cold water had splashed over her. She snatched her hands away with an expression that bordered on horror and jammed them into her lap, looking determinedly away from him. Harry felt strangely calm in the face of this unexpected reaction, more curious than disappointed or spurned. He said nothing, did nothing, only folded his hands on the table and sat back in his chair. When she finally returned his gaze, he cocked his head and gave her his kindest smile.

"Well. That was intense," she said. Her voice was shaky, and she looked as though she would have Apparated anywhere but there, had she known how. Harry averted his eyes with a wan smile and let the moment pass.

He glanced around at the other tables, noting ruefully that once again, everyone *else* in the shop was lost in an intimate conversation. Ondossi peeked around too, obviously desperate for a new topic. "Ron and Luna are really hitting it off," she observed quietly. "She's pretty much resigned herself to a cottage for one with lots of cats, because few people give her a second glance, especially boys. She's been disappointed so many times that she no longer has any expectation of finding friends, let alone someone to love her. But Ron liked riding around with her today. It made him curious about her. He's been trying to send her signals since they sat down, and she keeps ignoring them, refusing to believe that they have any meaning. But it's going to backfire on her, because she's become a puzzle to him now, and he's getting more and more determined to solve her."

Harry gaped at her, but she merely shifted in her seat and indicated Elias and Ginny with a toss of her head. "They're cute together. She'd never noticed him before today--he was just a teammate for Quidditch. She's been learning things about him all day long: he's from a big family with lots of brothers, he's neither proud nor ashamed of his famous name, he wants lots of kids and will make a great father. It's all caught her eye, and her eyes have been closed to everyone but you for a long time. She's been taking it all in, saying very little in return, but he likes that. He already knew about her dad being Minister, and her brothers being the hotshots on Diagon Alley with their store, and Bill the hero who defended Hogwarts from Greyback. He thinks it's charming that she has such famous relatives and doesn't drop names, or brag, or act snooty. His home isn't far from here, and he's trying to decide if he could make it there and back before dark, to pick up a belated Christmas present for her. They've got some traditional handmade family gift that he's itching to give her, kind of like Molly Weasley's sweaters."

She took a sip of tea and looked beyond their table to Hermione and Krum. "Hermie is in for a surprise later. Viktor has an engagement ring in his pocket. He made a lot of money for catching the bug at the World Cup match, even though his team didn't win. He spent almost half of it on the ring. It's a whopper--a huge clear diamond with no inclusions, on a titanium band. She has no idea that he's planning to propose." She smirked. "Poor guy's been trolling for her since he spent that year at Hogwarts, but he didn't quite know how to win her over. He did a very smart thing, going away and letting her grow up a little, without him. She missed him when he was gone, and then when he came back, she was flattered. It all adds up in her mind: that he's stable and secure, and yet not cloying or suffocating. She thought she'd have to choose between a career and a companion--that those were mutually exclusive. Viktor makes her feel like he'll still want her, even if she follows her ambitions. Silly girl--of course he will."

How she could pick up so much without glazing over was still beyond Harry, but he was in no mood for a Legilimency lesson. "Silly girl," he repeated. "What about this silly girl, this one here with me?"

She stared into her teacup as though it had spoken, not Harry. "No silly girls here. Just spooks."

"Tura." He reached across the table again and set his hand over hers on the teacup. She clenched her jaw and stood up, yanking her knapsack from the floor.

"I'll get the bill, gang," she said a bit too casually, and scooted to the counter. Harry smiled bitterly to himself and shook his head.

The walk back to Hogwarts proved very entertaining, with Harry feeling like quite the voyeur as he watched the three other couples. Krum's hand kept drifting toward a pocket in his robes, usually patting the surface briefly and dropping back to his side. Harry composed himself to read him during one such pass, having guessed (correctly) that the box containing the ring was in this pocket. As Krum made sure for the millionth time that it had not fallen out of his robe, Harry caught a clear memory of the ring nestled in its velvet lining and nearly whistled out loud. Tura was right; it was big enough to choke a dragon.

Harry knew Ron well enough that there was no need for Legilimency to see that he was intrigued. It was obvious in the narrowing of Ron's eyes, the calculated way he spoke. Ron looked the same way during a particularly good game of Wizard Chess, or that day over the pitch when the two of them vowed (albeit briefly) to depart and hunt down Voldemort on their own. *That was Lavender Brown's problem all along*, Harry suddenly realized. *She took all the unknowns out of the equation, and Ron got bored with her.* Harry took a closer look at Luna, recalling how she'd startled him many times with her offbeat but insightful remarks. She could keep Ron on his toes for years and years without even having to try.

It was harder to look at Ginny and Elias, for she was his first real love, and the thought of her drifting away sent a painful stab through his stomach. He set his jaw and listened as he walked behind them, and thought about what Tura had told him. "He has lots of brothers... he'll make a great father." *That's obvious*, thought Harry. Elias was kind and sturdy, a perfect foil to Ginny's willful temperament. Harry realized he could never go back to Ginny, even if Elias left the picture; she deserved someone... not necessarily *better*, but definitely someone *else*. Someone who knew how to live in a noisy, loving household, who wouldn't tire of it and long for solitude when the novelty wore off. Elias caught his eye while turning to speak to Ginny, and Harry remembered Ron's reluctant "if you must" glare, that first time he had snogged Ginny the previous year. Pulling metaphorically on his mental bootstraps, Harry met Elias's questioning glance with an approving nod and backed away.

For the remainder of the afternoon and dinner in the Great Hall, Harry did his best to relax and enjoy the evening, and not to think at all about Ondossi.

He bided his time, knowing that Viktor would do his best to whisk Hermione off after supper and ask the question that was now weighing on his mind like a lead ingot. Harry was tempted to reveal the secret after the two of them departed, but decided to let Hermione break the news. He was a bit curious to see whether Hermione would announce it right away, then laughed internally for automatically assuming that she would accept.

Luna, always off on her own plane of reality, eventually invited everyone to the Ravenclaw common room to see an article from the Quibbler, and since neither Ron, Ginny, nor Elias particularly wanted the evening to end, they enthusiastically accepted the opportunity to leave together. Harry followed them out to the double doors, but paused before stepping into the Entrance Hall. As he expected, Ondossi said goodnight and headed for the oak front doors instead of going upstairs with the group. Harry picked up his Firebolt and followed her.

"Hop on," he said, pushing open the door.

"I can climb."

"I know." He tipped his head at the broomstick. "And you should. But hop on anyway."

Ondossi closed her eyes and sighed, but she stepped over the broomstick. He settled in front of her and waited. She put her hands on his hips, but as soon as the broom came up underneath them, she scooted forward and wrapped her arms firmly around his middle. Smiling, Harry kicked off and sailed to her sleeping platform.

As they glided to a halt, he let go of the Firebolt, knowing it would hover a few inches above the planks for an easy dismount. Before Tura could dart away, he captured her hands and held her in place. When standing up straight, she came up a bit higher against his back than when they were leaning into the broomstick, and he let his head drop back to rest upon her forehead. The moon was up, nearly full, reflecting pale blue from the snow against the darkness of the Forbidden Forest. Both watched as nothing happened, and listened to the silence broken only by the peaceful rhythm of their breath.

"Tura?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes?"

"If I let go of your hands and turn around, will you promise not to pull away?"

"Why the Sam Hill would I promise that?"

Harry laughed soundlessly. "Because if you won't promise, I won't let go. We'll be stuck here."

Her body shook as she, too, held back her laughter. "Think so? You're bound to get tired at some point."

Undaunted, Harry tried a different tack. Taking both of her hands into one of his with a tight grip, he tugged open his practice robes and untucked his shirt from his trousers with a quick yank. Grinning fiendishly at her stunned gasp, he laced his fingers between hers again and pulled her hands up under his shirt. They were cold against his warm belly, but he gritted his teeth and tightened his grip for the inevitable fight.

It wasn't long in coming. "What in... Harry Potter, you let go this instant!" Ondossi curled her fists; the tops of her fingers were even colder than her palms.

Harry shook his head, laughing aloud. "Nope, not 'til you promise. Come now, what's the matter? You touched me just like this, the very first day we met."

"Yeah, and I knocked you flat, too." She wrenched so hard with one elbow that she nearly pulled free.

"You caught me off guard," he teased. "Promise."

She struggled and tugged a bit more, but finally rested her cheek against his back and sighed. "Harry. Fine. I'll give you ten seconds, then I bolt."

"Thirty."

"Not happening."

"Twenty, then."

She growled. "You're *impossible*."

"That's rich, coming from you."

With a final huff, she butted her forehead against his back. "Fine. Twenty seconds. One, Mississippi. Two, Mississippi..."

Harry dropped her wrists and turned to face her. He let his nose drag over her forehead as he came around, keeping a point of contact between them. She drew a rapid breath and stopped counting, but, true to her word, did not back away. *Tura*, he said, not out loud but into her mind. He continued to lower his head, nuzzling the hollow of her eye, the rise of her cheekbone, the warmth of her lips.

For a moment, the rest of the world disappeared, but it was over far too quickly.

"Now, Harry!" she admonished, looking decidedly flustered. She stepped back from him, interestingly, rather than trying to shove him away, and Harry simply moved forward with his own impish grin. Glaring, she took another step and wagged her finger at him. "Behave yourself!"

"You know, you're going to run out of platform very soon," he warned wryly. "You might fall--and I'd have to catch you." Harry covered her protesting hand with his own and eased it to one side, making himself some room to step in close.

"Hey," she said, her voice growing stern but not particularly convincing. "I mean it, Harry. Bad idea."

Harry scoffed affectionately. "Don't be silly. Tura... hasn't this been a wonderful day? You seemed to enjoy my company, though I suppose I could be wrong." He entwined their fingers and laid his other hand on her shoulder. When this brought no resistance, he leaned down into another kiss, which was also cut far too short.

"Harry," Ondossi whispered, bowing her head.

He smiled and shook his head indulgently, undaunted by this halfhearted resistance. Having summoned enough courage to kiss her, he felt bold enough to try something else. Lifting her chin, Harry looked into her eyes and pushed past them into her thoughts. He didn't have to go deep to find what he was seeking, which was just as well, as she promptly slammed her mind closed.

"HEY! Foul!" she squawked earnestly, shoving his shoulder. Harry's smile only widened, and she shoved him again, pushing past him this time to return to the center of the platform. "That was SO totally not fair, scoping me out--not about *that*! Geez!"

Harry shrugged unconcernedly. "You're right. I'll make it up to you. Here, you can do it right back to me."

She smiled, though she deliberately and unsuccessfully tried to hide it. "Pass. God, you're such a dork!"

Harry crossed the platform and put his hands on her waist. "Tura, why are you running? I know what I saw just now."

"Oh, don't get all smug! Maybe I think about all the guys that way."

Harry laughed out loud, as did Ondossi. "Somehow I don't think so," he said, raising her chin for another kiss. This one lasted long enough to make them both a little breathless before she abruptly pulled away.

There didn't seem to be any smile this time, which Harry confirmed when she lit the lamp beside her hammock. She sat down in it and folded her arms, staring at him without speaking.

Harry sighed. "Okay, I give up. Are you going to tell me why you're fighting this, or do I have to guess?"

"Harry..." she groaned, finally meeting his eyes. "Look," she said, then paused again. "You're right, okay? Everything you're thinking about here, about us... you're right. Right now there's nothing I'd rather do than fall asleep in your arms, and wake up beside you tomorrow morning."

Harry's breath caught in his throat and he took a step toward her. She raised her hands in a halt, shaking her head. "We *can't* though, Harry. Will you, just this once, not argue with me? Please?"

"Tura." He didn't move any closer, but he took hold of her hands. "I don't understand."

"I know you don't! That's why I asked you to just accept it, just this once. Can't you do that?"

"No, I can't! Tura, this is ridiculous." He dropped his voice. "Look, if there's a reason we can't... be closer, I need to know it. Explain it to me."

Ondossi drew up her legs, pulling a thick fur pelt around her back, then sat in silence for a moment. "All right," she said. "You want reasons. How about this: Everybody I care about seems to end up dead. You can relate, no?"

That hit close to home. "Touche'," said Harry, squirming. "Though maybe we deserve each other. If nothing else, to keep all those other poor souls out there out of danger."

She laughed bitterly. "Maybe so," she said, twisting and tugging the net of her hammock. "All right, you don't like that one--how's this? You're a student. I'm a teacher. Even I know there's rules about that."

Harry scoffed. "Please. Since when do you worry about rules?"

"Well, maybe it's about time I started!" she barked, nearly shouting.

He scrutinized her for a moment, his shoulders tensing. "I can't believe this. I'll tell you what: I'll quit school. Right now." He didn't feel too sure of himself as soon as the words were in the air, but Fred and George certainly had no regrets.

"You will not either," she said, exasperated. "It wouldn't matter anyway; I'd still be your teacher, hotshot."

"You don't say? Ah, yes, I forgot--you're supposed to teach me how to use Dark magic, how to *murder*. Obviously no snogging allowed--that would be *unethical*."

Ondossi let go of the hammock with a noisy huff, but said nothing. She finally slouched and tucked her hands beneath the fur. "Touche', yourself," she grumbled, staring off to the side.

Harry grinned again. "Come on now. Stop being so silly." He leaned closer, but she waved him back with an irritated glower.

"Don't, Harry. I'm telling you, you're writing a check that you're not gonna wanna cash."

"There you go again. I don't even know what that means!"

Ondossi clenched her eyes shut and slouched even further. "It means I still have secrets, okay? Things you're not going to like when you find out. I don't... It's not fair to ramp things up between us without being honest. Not fair to either of us. But I can't. Be honest, that is." She looked utterly miserable.

Harry suddenly felt a bit lightheaded, and nearly laughed. "Uh, Tura? You've stopped making sense. First of all, I'd say things have ramped up already. And whatever your 'secrets,' they won't change who you are, or that I'm falling in love with you."

Both of them went wide-eyed at this admission, but Ondossi hardened immediately.

"Love?" She spat the word like a curse. "You're playing with fire, Harry James Potter! You don't love me. You don't even know me!" She pointed her chin defiantly. "You think you do, hotshot, but you don't. You don't even know my full name!"

Harry bristled; that much was true. "What difference does that make? I still know who you are inside."

"Who I am? Oh, that's nice. You don't know my mother, my father, my people. You know nothing about me but the little snips I've shown you, and believe me, they're not the whole picture. Far from it!"

Her words ripped through him like shards of glass; for an instant all he did was stare. "What's the matter with you?" he said, his eyes narrowing. "Look, I don't know what your game is, but I'm not playing it anymore. You want distance? You've got it." He stalked over to his Firebolt and picked it up, intending to launch without looking back, but he heard a strange sound and spun around. Her face was buried in her hands, and she was shaking hard enough to jiggle the whole hammock, making it creak; she was obviously sobbing.

Harry knew he should just push off, but this was all so bizarre, so ridiculous. The wild play of emotions had worn him down, but he *cared about* this crazy witch, and hope still burned in his chest. "If it hurts you so much," he finally said softly, "why are you pushing me away?"

She tried to say something, but she was crying too hard to get the words out. He folded his arms and waited for her to catch her breath.

"It hurts because it's an illusion, Harry," she finally said, her voice raw. "I want to believe it. You want to believe it. But the sad truth is, I could shatter this so-called 'love' of yours with one word. That's what hurts. It's not your fault, or your problem. It just hurts." Her throat made a squeaky, breathy sound from holding back a sob. "Just go, Harry."

That stung. Harry dropped the broomstick and stamped angrily back to the hammock. "You think you know what I feel? Or that you can change it? Or that you can just dismiss me, for that matter? How dare you sit there and decide everything for both of us?"

"You wanna know why I get to decide? Because I know my secrets, Harry, and you don't! Meaning I know what's going on, and you don't! Plus, I know the limits of your tolerance."

"My... tolerance." His voice cracked. "Okay. You know what? You've just reached my *tolerance*, Tura. If your secret is so bloody terrible, then I demand to know it. Now. Spit it out."

"Please go, Harry."

Clenching his teeth, he growled, "I'm not going anywhere." He put his hand below her chin and raised her head; her skin was cold and slippery with tears. "Not until I know what you're hiding from me."

Her voice broke too, high-pitched and fearful. "Please go."

"Say it, Tura, or I'll go into your mind and find it." Harry wasn't sure at all that he could do that, but he meant to try. At this point, he didn't care about the consequences.

"Merope."

Harry shook his head. "What?"

"My name. Tura Merope Ondossi."

Every hair on his body stood on end, and he was suddenly drenched in sweat. His ears began to ring and scintillations flashed at the edges of his vision; he was on the verge of passing out.

"I was named after my grandmother," she continued. "On my father's side. My parents weren't married, so my last name is Ondossi, like my mother. But she wanted to honor his family, too, even though they weren't Inupiat. So she gave me his mother's name." She closed her eyes and swallowed. "The other options were 'Gaunt' and 'Riddle,' and those are just lame."

Riddle's daughter. Harry stared at her, dumbstruck and breathless, repeating her confession in his mind in order to comprehend it. Riddle's daughter. *Voldemort's* daughter. She was bound by blood to his mortal enemy, a bond so strong that even her superlative magic could not break it. Without thinking, he put his hand on her throat as if she might escape into darkness if he didn't restrain her. *That's why you can't kill him*, he projected into her mind, too livid to speak. *You owe him for bringing you to life*.

"Yes," she rasped. He felt the vibration of her larynx all the way into his wrist, and for that reason alone it occurred to him that he was strangling her. Before he released her, however, he drew back his other hand and struck her with the full force of his fury.

Harry shoved her back into the hammock and spun away, grabbing his broomstick and launching into the night.

## 32: Truth and Consequences

Chapter 32 of 50

Harry's act of passion comes back to bite him in more ways than one.



Harry climbed the spiral staircase to his dormitory in silence. It was 2:30 AM and he had no desire to explain his whereabouts to anyone. He pulled off his Quidditch robes outside the door of his room so as not to wake Ron. He placed a Silencing spell on the door, on the odd chance that it might squeak when he finally pushed it open.

Ron's bed was empty.

Harry scoffed and went inside. *So much for stealth*, he thought. He tossed his clothes at the foot of his bed and was pulling on his pajamas when he heard footsteps on the stairs. He leapt into bed and drew the curtains, still struggling with his nightshirt as Ron threw open the door. "Harry! Wake up!" Ron yelled, then muttered a spell to light all the lamps. Harry barely had time to put his head on the pillow before Ron yanked the curtains open. He lifted it back up and blinked as if he'd been awoken from a sound sleep.

"You're not going to believe this, mate," Ron began, a huge grin on his face.

"Hermione and Viktor are getting married," Harry said flatly, dropping his head back onto the pillow.

Ron sputtered. "How'd you--?" He paused. "Ah, you and your Legilimency! Here I've been looking for you for half an hour and you already knew it. Where've you been all night? We have a right celebration going on over in the Ravenclaw common room."

"I went for a walk."

Ron's smile vanished and he climbed in and sat at the foot of Harry's bed. "What's gotten into you?" he asked.

"Nothing, Ron. I was asleep. I... I picked up on the engagement ring while we were all at the tea shop. I figured it was best if I just laid low until after he asked. Didn't want to ruin the surprise, you know."

Ron clicked his teeth. "Ever the gentleman, aren't you?" Harry made no response. "Well, it's all out in the open now--come on, get up and join the party!" He pushed Harry's feet toward the edge of the bed.

"No!" said Harry sharply, then lowered his voice. "Not tonight, Ron. I really need to get some sleep. I think I flew too high, maybe got a little altitude sickness."

Ron frowned, then shrugged. "Oh. Sorry to hear it. Well, we'll try to save you some fun for tomorrow night." Harry nodded gratefully, tugging the blanket up to his chin.

When the room was dark and quiet again, there was a familiar rustle overhead. Feathers brushed Harry's cheek as Fawkes glided down from the tester. He sat down beside Harry's pillow and crooned quietly, attempting to wriggle under the covers.

"Just go to sleep, Fawkes," Harry whispered, and rolled over to face the other way.

Harry slept fitfully, despite being treated to Fawkes's comforting hum every time he awoke. Ron bustled in sometime around four but Harry said nothing, feigning sleep as Ron settled into bed. Harry woke several times to the sound of soft snores, and irritably wished that he, too, could stay asleep long enough to reach the point of snoring. When he finally awoke to pale daylight filtering through the curtains, he climbed out of bed in resignation.

Fawkes followed him down to the common room, which normally would have pleased Harry, but it was an unwelcome imposition today. He frowned at the phoenix to no effect, then sighed. "You might as well sit," he grumbled, offering his shoulder. Better that than having Fawkes flapping around his head all morning.

It was far too early for breakfast, but he was too restless to sit around in the silent common room. Once through the portrait hole, however, he stopped short, for there was nowhere in particular he wanted to go. All he really wanted to do was get back in bed, but sleep was impossible. Finally Fawkes made the decision for him, pointing down the corridor with a flick of his beak.

Harry suspected that they were aimed at the Headmaster's Office, and he was correct. Fawkes squeezed his shoulder gently as they neared the stone gargoyle. "I really don't think McGonagall's in there at this hour," Harry said quietly, reluctant to break the almost eerie silence of the corridor. Fawkes paid him no mind and spread his wings, whereupon the gargoyle leaped aside with a bow and the wall split open to reveal the moving staircase.

Harry gazed sidelong at Fawkes, who tossed his bill toward the entrance meaningfully. "If you're sure," said Harry, who by no means felt at all sure about parading into the Headmaster's Office unannounced. "You'd better cover for me if I get in trouble," he added uneasily, then mounted the stairs.

Harry knocked on the polished oak door at the top and was not surprised when there was no reply. "See?" he began, but fell silent as the door swung open silently on its own. Once again he eyeballed Fawkes. "Did you do that, or is someone in there?" Fawkes fluffed up his feathers and sprang from Harry's shoulder to glide into the office,



alighting on the huge clawfoot desk with a brisk flap. The door closed behind Harry as he followed.

The many strange silver instruments that had always cluttered the room in Dumbledore's time were gone. McGonagall's tin of shortbread now sat atop the desk, and indeed, Fawkes appeared most interested in it and was nudging it experimentally with his bill. Oddly, Fawkes's golden perch remained beside the door to the staircase, though to Harry's knowledge, the phoenix spent all his time on top of Harry's bed in Gryffindor Tower. Perhaps McGonagall kept it as a memento, he wondered, removing the lid on the shortbread tin before Fawkes managed to dent it.

"Don't tell me you brought me all the way here to steal shortbread." Fawkes peered at him and flicked a biscuit his way with a toss of his head. Harry caught it, but was in no mood to eat. He put it absently into a pocket of his robes, watching Fawkes dig into the tin with gusto. "You're going to make yourself sick, you know," he finally reprimanded, pulling the box out from under the scarlet head and replacing the lid. Fawkes bleated once in indignation, then turned away and plopped onto the desk to devour the pile of biscuits he'd pulled out.

"Now what?" said Harry. It felt very uncomfortable to be in the office without the Headmistress's permission, and Harry wondered if he shouldn't simply pick Fawkes up and carry him out. "I know you're up to something," he pleaded quietly. "Can't we just get on with it? We shouldn't be here."

"Indeed not!" Harry jumped. He glared up at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus. "You ought to be down in Slytherin House where you belong!"

Harry would have hexed the portrait right off the wall if such a thing could be done. He fingered the handle of his wand but said nothing.

"Why *have* you come up here?" asked Phineas lazily. "Your pet feels peckish for biscuits, so you just walk right in? I suppose the almighty Boy Who Lived need not respect the Head's privacy."

Harry refused to take the bait. "I don't know why I'm here. Fawkes will make it clear when he's ready."

"Ah, yes, Fawkes. You do own the place, don't you?" the portrait leered. The phoenix regarded it sternly but made no sound. "Did you know that, Potter--that Fawkes holds the allodial title to this institution? It's true. Prior to the building of Hogwarts, this land had no owner. The original tenants fled, leaving behind only the magic to keep it hidden; they will never return. The Founders stumbled upon it through pure luck and claimed ownership by building this magnificent castle upon the wild ground. That's known as 'adverse possession,' or some call it 'homesteading,' which sounds more benign. Your crimson friend was there at the time. The only remaining member of the original group. He truly has the right to pilfer Minerva's biscuits without even knocking."

Harry peered at Fawkes, who raised his wings in a sort of shrug. He turned back to the portrait. "How do you know that?"

"I know a great many things, boy, because I pay attention! For example, I know what you did last night." Harry's hand flew to his wand again, but Phineas merely scoffed in disdain. "Honestly, Potter. Acromantulas? Hardly worth the bother, though I can't say that they'll be missed."

Harry saw a smattering of movement out of the corners of his eyes, but he ignored it.

"Still, one must start somewhere," continued the portrait of the former headmaster. "You've resisted it for so many years, though, Potter. You wouldn't take the gift that the Sorting Hat offered, to put you in Slytherin's house amongst your peers. But it seems you have come around at last. Why, it's a wonder the stones of Gryffindor's tower didn't come tumbling around you in outrage last night."

"That's a lie," breathed Harry.

By now, every portrait in the room had crowded to the edges of their frames for an optimal view of Phineas and Harry--all except Dumbledore, who continued to slumber as he had done since his portrait first appeared. Harry and Phineas faced one another in a locked silence, until some other portrait finally piped up in a nervous squeak, "What's happened, Potter?"

He didn't reply at first, staring down the mocking sneer on Phineas's face, but then a chorus of voices broke out from every corner of the room: "Tell us, Potter." "What have you done?" "For Merlin's sake, Phineas, *guide* the lad, not aggravate him!" Phineas curled his lip and prepared to speak, but Harry silenced the entire room by raising his hand.

"I discovered how to kill last night."

Harry expected an outburst of shock and dismay, but there were only a few startled gasps here and there; most of the portraits seemed to take the news in stride, nodding sadly or averting their eyes. A petite blond witch in a high corner dabbed her cheeks with a kerchief. Fawkes seemed the most upset at his admission, laying his head on the desk with a plaintive cry.

"Tell them the circumstances, Potter. They're all intrigued, and it would be so much more interesting coming from you than me."

Harry shook the stray hairs out of his eyes and licked the front of his teeth, calming his temper. "You don't know anything. I don't owe any explanations, not to you, nor anyone else." He clenched his jaw tightly, with every intention of walking out of the room and never returning, but was stopped short by a quiet plea.

"I would like to hear it from you, Harry," said the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

The sound of Dumbledore's voice immediately drained the rage and temerity from Harry. For a moment he was sent through time, back to his first trip to this office during his second year, miserable with the certainty that he was about to be blamed not only for opening the Chamber of Secrets, but for incinerating "Dumbledore's pet bird" as well. Harry swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, then raised his head and turned to regard the portrait.

"You *can* speak, then," he said quietly, ignoring Phineas's contemptuous snort.

"I vowed that I would not speak until the many affairs I set into motion were completed. I still have secrets I must keep, Harry," Dumbledore sighed wearily. "Even in death. But please tell me this, Harry. What happened?"

Harry's jaw fell, but he snapped it shut in an effort to keep from laughing. Not that there was even a drop of humor in the air, but the absurdity of the situation demanded it. What happened? Where should he even begin? Dumbledore must have realized the magnitude of his question; he nodded, peering poignantly over his half-moon spectacles. "Speak only of last night, Harry. Even without the historical details, I'm sure I'll get the gist of the story."

"Last night," Harry said, resisting a strong but childish urge to demand that Dumbledore pony up some details of his own before he would get a word out of him. "All right. This is how it happened. Last night, I was... *with* someone. A woman. I thought I knew her. I felt... close to her. She seemed to feel it too; it had been growing for a long time. But last night I learned something about her. Something she'd deliberately kept from me." He paused, glaring at Dumbledore meaningfully, and to his satisfaction, the old man winced in obvious regret. "She wasn't who she... who I..." Harry couldn't find the right words, though he searched for some time. He finally abandoned that part of the explanation; it was only "historical detail" anyway.

"I... hurt her, and I knew if I stayed, I'd do worse." Harry's brow broke out in sweat, but the words were steamrolling out of him. "I've been angry before, but never like this. Even when Snape--" Dumbledore raised a hand to halt him and Harry gnashed his teeth, but he rephrased himself. "I've been betrayed and attacked more times than I can count, but it was always someone I'd never really trusted in the first place, like Quirrel. Or someone that I *knew* had it in for me, like Snape or Voldemort. Even when Crouch passed himself off as Moody and pretended to be my friend, he never got that far under my skin, into my... heart. But last night... I *believed* in her." He had to pause again; his throat felt too dry and tight to speak.

"I finally knew what it meant--about needing the right *intent* to cast an Unforgivable Curse. I had it, and I knew I had it. It was time. So I went into the Forbidden Forest. She took me there once, to kill bugs and birds. It was too dark to find any of those, but I went to Aragog's old nesting grounds. There were plenty of... targets." Harry grimaced in disgust. "The ones that lived pounced on the dead ones as fast as they could, not caring at all that they were gobbling up their own brother or sister. They were probably grateful for the free meal." Harry sighed and slumped against the desk, suddenly bone-tired as though the night of lost sleep had finally caught up with him.

The portraits said nothing, which was fine with Harry for the moment. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, then his shoulders; his neck was stiff and aching. When he finally took a deep breath and looked up, he half-expected to find Dumbledore settled back to sleep. The old wizard was standing at the edge of his frame, however, seemingly wishing he could step beyond it. "May I ask you one more question, Harry?"

"What?" he said listlessly.

"Your scar. Did it hurt you?"

That jolted through the exhaustion. Harry sat up straight, his brow creasing in amazement. "No. Not at all. Not even a twinge."

Dumbledore settled back into his chair, folding his hands into their customary position in his lap, but did not yet close his eyes. "That gladdens me, Harry. I think Phineas has been a bit presumptuous in his judgment. It is a terrible thing to kill, but even a Gryffindor must undertake it when the circumstances demand." He paused, and his eyes misted over with profound grief. "I'm sorry this has fallen to you, Harry Potter."

Harry was being dismissed. He nodded at the portrait and held his arm out for Fawkes, who took Harry's collar delicately in his bill for balance and scrambled up onto his shoulder. Harry didn't want to look at Dumbledore again, to see him close his eyes and leave the wizard world to its own devices once more, so he simply turned to go. Dumbledore's voice froze him at the office door. "If I may, Harry, one last thing?"

Harry left his hand on the latch and turned his head, but did not look at the portrait.

"You are the son of James Potter, and for that reason Severus Snape hated you." Harry turned further, his eyes flashing bitterly as he regarded Dumbledore once more. The old wizard's gaze held firm. "That, you did not deserve, Harry."

Harry lifted the latch, his lip curling with disgust. "Is that all?"

"Only one more," said Dumbledore quietly. "Miss Ondossi is not her father, any more than you are yours."

Harry stood in the doorway for a long time before stepping onto the spiral stairs.

He felt even more aimless than when he'd left Gryffindor Tower. Looking down the corridor, he realized that he wasn't far from the Room of Requirement. He strode purposefully to the entry wall and paced before it three times, saying, "I need a place to be alone." When the door appeared, it was made of thick steel with a locking wheel like a Muggle bank vault. "Perfect," growled Harry. He stepped through it into a windowless room containing only a cot dressed with unbleached cotton sheets and a tiny table bearing an oil lamp, the glass chimney so stained with creosote that only a dull sepia glow came through.

He flopped on to the creaky cot and put his arms over his eyes, though the lamp was hardly bright enough to be bothersome. It had been a relief to talk about what he'd done, though he was quite sure the rest of the world wouldn't take the news as patiently as the group of Headmasters. He could see the headlines in the *Prophet* already: **Boy Who Lived Becomes Boy Who Kills**, or some such idiocy. Even worse, once word spread that he could kill, he could no longer hide behind his youth. Every day he waited to confront Voldemort would be seen as an act of cowardice by sorcerers the world over. They knew nothing of the Horcruxes or the need to destroy them first; they would blame him for every atrocity Voldemort carried out from that day forward. "The Chosen One could have stopped him by now. Why won't he act?" they would demand, and the *Prophet* would hand them whatever explanation would sell the most copy.

Harry rolled onto his side, tucking his knees up to his chest, and closed his eyes.

"There you are. Harry!" Ron abandoned his post at the foot of the marble stairs, where crowds of returning students were stomping and spelling the snow and mud from their shoes. The prefects were supposed to keep the traffic moving, as the people still outside were in no mood to wait for the earlier arrivals to take off their coats.

"Where've you been, mate? Viktor's in a right state--I practically had to Stupefy him to keep him from telling Lupin you'd run off."

"I didn't *run off*," Harry snapped. "I was here, I just needed a little peace and quiet."

"Well, you don't have to bite my head off!" said Ron. "No one knew what to think, and Viktor felt guilty that he was busy proposing instead of keeping tabs on you, and that of course set Hermione off... I've been listening to it all afternoon, you know."

Harry stopped on the stairs and closed his eyes a moment. "All right. Sorry, Ron." He didn't feel particularly remorseful, but Ron *had* absorbed a lot of flak on his account.

Ron studied him carefully, then his expression softened. "Where've you been then? You don't look so good."

Harry shook his head slowly, his eyes still shut. "Not now. I just want to get to dinner."

Ron proved the depth of his friendship by dashing down the stairs and staving off both Hermione and Viktor so that Harry could slink into the Great Hall and find a red chair at a table in the back. Only three other students joined his table, all second-years who sat on the far side and spoke quietly among themselves, casting uneasy but admiring glances now and again at Harry. This suited him just fine; it gave him an excuse to spend the meal diligently staring at his plate. He was nearly finished with dessert before he realized that Ondossi was not at the staff table.

He made a point of ignoring that fact until the next morning in the common room, when a group of third-years passed his chair, discussing their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson with Professor *Moody*. Harry's stomach clenched in near panic; had she *left Hogwarts* on account of what had happened? He jumped up and caught the nearest third-year by the elbow, startling her so badly that she squealed.

"Did you just say that Moody's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Harry had caught himself in time to keep from bellowing at the poor girl, but she still looked like she might drop all of her books out of fright. He realized a bit more explanation was in order. "I overheard when you walked by... did I hear you right? Ondossi isn't teaching Defense?"

The girl gulped, then stammered, "That's right. We had Professor Moody." She began to furrow her brow, slowly realizing that even though he was Harry Potter and a seventh-year, he really didn't have the right to make her quake in her boots.

Harry asked his next question even more mildly. "Did he say why?"

"He said he would substitute for a few days while she was in the hospital wing. He didn't say what was wrong."

Harry let her go, feeling the blood drain from his face. *Why's she in the Hospital Wing?* He looked down at his hand in horror, expecting to find it covered in blood. It was not, of course, but he suddenly found that he couldn't recall any specifics about what happened between her confession and his trip to the Forbidden Forest.

His distress must have showed on his face, as the incoming tide of students parted for him with subdued expressions as he strode from the common room. He froze, however, when he reached the great double doors of the Hospital Wing. "Miss Ondossi is not her father," Dumbledore's portrait had said. Of course she wasn't. Like a blow

from a hammer, a deep and painful shame crushed his chest. *She begged me to just let it go, but I wouldn't, I insisted she tell me...*

Madam Pomfrey appeared in the door at that moment, jumping backwards in surprise. "Merlin's beard, Potter! You startled me! What are you doing, young man? Are you ill?" She narrowed her eyes, apparently deciding that he didn't look very healthy.

"No, no," he said. "I just... I heard Ondossi..." Mortified, he realized that Madam Pomfrey probably knew what he'd done!

She simply nodded, however, and pulled the door closed behind her. "Not to worry, Harry. She went into town last night and got into a little scuffle. A few non-magical injuries and quite a bit of frostbite, but nothing I can't set right. She's awake, you can go in and see her--"

"No!" he blurted, adding, "I've, ah, got to get to class," after seeing her puzzled expression. "Glad she's all right." He turned and dashed down the corridor without another word.

*She lied! Why would she cover for me? Frostbite...* He ducked into an alcove on the second floor to catch his breath and think. It all came back to him in a rush: his hand closing on her throat as the other struck her, *struck her*, every bit the vicious bully as Uncle Vernon or Dudley had ever been. He had seen her fall into the hammock as he turned his back; she was probably knocked out by the blow, left there to freeze in the winter night. He left her there and she could have *frozen to death*, and she hadn't told Madam Pomfrey it was his fault, that he had done this. "Tura."

Harry suddenly needed to be sick, and charged headlong to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

It was the closest, and therefore the best option, but Myrtle popped out of the U-bend with an indignant shriek while he was throwing up. "That's disgusting! You could at least give a girl a little warning before barfing on her head!"

Harry couldn't reply right away, but when he finally did, he wasn't apologetic. "Couldn't really help it," he panted, shivering.

Myrtle looked like she would sass him, but took pity instead. "There, there," she said, putting a spectral arm around his shoulders (making his chills even worse). "I suppose that's to be expected--you're really sick, aren't you, not just from taking a Puking Pastille?" He shook his head, unsure if he was finished or not. "Very well, then," sighed Myrtle. "I absolutely hate it when people come in and throw up on me, then it turns out they're just skiving. They know exactly when it's going to happen; you'd think they'd have the courtesy to leave a second or two earlier so they could make it to an *unoccupied* toilet!"

Harry sat on the stone floor and leaned his head back against the door, wishing he'd stopped on the third floor instead.

Myrtle sprang up and did a backflip out of the stall, swooping right through Harry as she returned under the door. Hovering over the toilet, she peered at him through her thick glasses and smiled in a not-quite friendly manner. "He used to do the same thing, you know."

Harry almost asked who she meant, but realized immediately that she must be referring to Draco Malfoy. "I'll bet he did," Harry mumbled.

"I helped him feel better, you know. Just by listening." The ghost eyed him expectantly.

"I don't need to talk."

Myrtle sniffed and turned sideways, her arms folded. She peeked down into the toilet and curled her lip. "'Course not. You could at least flush, though."

*I don't need to talk*, thought Harry, hoping to convince himself. Truthfully, he wanted very much to talk about what had happened, what he'd done, but absolutely not to Myrtle. Even though she loved secrets and hoarded them greedily, he couldn't face her if she knew what he'd done. And since she resided throughout the Hogwarts plumbing, it would be very hard to avoid her forever.

He got up, a bit unsteady, and tottered to the sink to wash his face. Myrtle followed him lazily, floating on her back at his shoulder level, using her crossed arms as a pillow. "Poor Harry," she said, not sounding particularly sympathetic. "Carrying around secrets too important to tell even a ghost. Well, if you change your mind, I'm only a tinkle away." With a sniff, Myrtle tessellated into a long, thin version of herself and dove down the drainpipe in the next sink, leaving him with no other company but his reflection in the mirror.

Harry didn't bother to look closely at himself very often, but it struck him at that moment that he seemed very ugly. Not just his scar, or his messy hair, but all of him, even his "mother's eyes" that everyone went on about. *How do I even pass for human?* he wondered bitterly.

"I can't do this," he said aloud.

"Do what?" said Myrtle, poking her head unexpectedly through the door of her stall. Harry nearly leaped out of his skin, having assumed she'd plumbed off to some other part of the castle.

He felt like screaming at her to go away, but something inside him gave way just a little. "I've done something, Myrtle. Something really stupid, that hurt someone else. And I don't know how to... make it right."

Her eyes lit up behind her thick glasses and she swooped through the door to his side. "Was it an accident, or on purpose?"

He stared at her a moment. "A little of both," he admitted, both to her and himself. "I mean, I did it, but I hadn't meant to be so... harsh."

She nodded sagely, gazing off in the distance as she processed the information. "Have you said you're sorry?" she asked at last, focusing again.

"Umm... No. This isn't something I can fix by saying 'sorry,' Myrtle."

She made a face. "Oh. So NOT apologizing will fix it?"

He had no answer for that, and sputtered a bit. "Well, no, not exactly. I mean, it might help, a little anyway, but--"

"But what?" she interrupted. "But it won't be enough? Maybe not, but it's a good place to start, don't you think? Because if you don't start *somewhere*, you'll never finish it, that's for sure." She nodded cockily, daring him to contradict her.

Harry had never thought of Myrtle as being particularly wise or thoughtful before, but it dawned on him that she had been around the castle longer than most of the people he knew. He gulped and stared at her a moment.

"Go on, Harry. Go take care of Step One and come back and tell me how it went, and we can think of the next step together if you want." Her eyes glittered at the prospect of setting up regular "dates" in her bathroom again.

Harry chewed his lip thoughtfully. He had no intention of taking Moaning Myrtle's advice on a regular basis, but this time she may have nailed it. "We'll see, Myrtle," he said, and headed toward the hospital wing.

Harry's resolve began to crumble even before he reached the top of the stairs, but he kept walking. When he reached the doors, he profoundly hoped that Ondossi would be asleep, and it took him a few minutes to gather enough nerve to push them open. She'd been tucked behind a screen at the far end of the room; he had a long walk ahead before he could even tell if she had any other visitors!

It was quiet. Harry wasn't sure if he should knock on the screen or just poke his head around it.

"That's close enough," she said. Her voice sounded strange, raspy and nasal.

Harry swallowed, trying to find some moisture in his suddenly dry mouth. "I can come back later," he blurted, backing away.

"Don't bother."

The order didn't surprise him, but her tone did. It was the same dismissive contempt with which she spoke of the Ministry, and it angered him. At least he was trying to make peace, after all! Harry stepped around the screen, determined to say what he had to say and get it over with. "Tura, look--"

The words shriveled up and died in his throat. He hadn't expected this. Her fingers and toes were black, reminiscent of Dumbledore's burnt hand, while her swollen hands and feet were many shades of purple and red, all coated with a clear yellow paste that left smudges on the bedlinens. He'd meant to look her straight in the eye, but he couldn't; both eyes were bruised shut, blending into a blackened nose which was covered in the same paste. What upset him the most, however, was the nearly perfect outline of a hand across her throat, a greenish-purple shadow that he could see, even from the end of the bed, was his own.

"I said that's close enough," she said quietly, and Harry suddenly recognized that this wasn't her voice of contempt for the Ministry, it was the one she used when she found Voldemort laying in wait for her, back in her little cabin. A voice of bravado to mask the desperate fear inside.

Harry backed away until he bumped the screen.

"Are you going to tell?" she asked.

"Tell?" he said incomprehendingly.

"Regarding my heritage."

*Oh.* He'd forgotten about her "dirty little secret;" it didn't seem so dirty anymore in the light of day. *She thinks I'm going to ruin her.* Harry realized that his hands had wrapped protectively around his own belly, as if he had anything to fear. "No," he finally said.

She shuddered in relief, which made him feel even worse. "You didn't tell," he added, as much a question as a statement.

"Tell? You mean about this?" She raised her arm to indicate her injuries with a sweeping motion, but winced and set it right back down instead. "No, I didn't *tell*. I need this job."

He blinked, shaking his head. "What?"

Ondossi sighed impatiently. "Just what I said. I need to stay here. To get you ready to take on the Dark Lord. I can't go home again until he's dead."

Harry was utterly boggled that she would remain at Hogwarts, much less continue to teach him, but it still wasn't adding up. "Why wouldn't... What does telling have to do with that?"

"Oh, come off it, hotshot! Are you really that stupid? Let me ask you something, Potter. Do you know the penalty for assaulting a professor at Hogwarts?"

Harry pulled his chin up and back, frowning. "Um, not exactly... probably being expelled, or--"

She scoffed. "You don't know. But let's review a little history. Your first year, you assaulted Professor Quirrell. Struck a mortal blow, I believe. And what consequence did that have, Potter? If memory serves, and it must, since it's your memory I picked through, you were given enough house points to win the annual trophy. Right? And then your second year, you put some pompous windbag into the Gork Room at St. Mungo's. Won the trophy that year too, I believe."

"Now just hold on--" Harry began, but she was only getting started.

"Then third year. That time you goaded your friends into becoming your accomplices, throwing Professor Snape against a wall and knocking him out. Fourth year, I'll give you that one, since Barty Crouch Jr. wasn't, technically speaking, a professor, he was just disguised as one. Then your fifth year. Let's see, you launched a Stinging Hex at Professor Snape again, and violated his mind with Legilimency. You didn't actually attack Professor Umbridge, but you led her into an ambush. I'd say the intent to harm was there, which is what counts.

"But your sixth year takes the cake, doesn't it? Slashed open another student like a hog at the slaughter. Fed the Headmaster a deadly potion, that left him weak and defenseless at the castle's worst hour. Then you took some more potshots at Professor Snape—even tried a few Unforgivables. That's a lot of assaults, Potter. And you don't even KNOW what the punishment is. What do you suppose that means?"

"You know what the circumstances--"

"Oh, of course, circumstances," she spat. "The great Albus Dumbledore, the only wizard Lord Voldemort ever feared, managed to let *all* of those bad guys infiltrate the castle right under his very nose. And he never caught on to a single one of them, either--not until you went out on a limb and dispatched each and every one. Isn't that amazing, Potter? You gotta wonder if the old man was losing touch, don't you? Or maybe, just *maybe*, he was crazy like a fox. Honing you into a weapon all on his own, right from day one. Ya think?"

At that moment, Harry couldn't think at all.

"And you are a weapon, Potter," she continued coldly. "Ruthless, calculating, powerful--and without any fear of recrimination. Because punishments are for other people, aren't they? People who don't have *special circumstances*. No one would ever *dream* of expelling the Boy-Who-Lived from Hogwarts, not when he's right on the cusp of taking on the Dark Lord once and for all. That would be insane! Far better to just can the Dark Arts professor; they have a limited shelf-life anyway."

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and peered at him through puffy eyelids. "No, Potter. I'm not telling anyone you did this. As soon as the FrostBreak salve is done, Pomfrey can heal up these bruises and it's back to the classroom. Gotta get you fine-tuned, boy! Besides, the other *Ess-kee-mohs* would laugh me out of town if they heard I got frostbite at this latitude." She dropped back onto her pillow, and undoubtedly would have rolled over if she could. A short time later, she demanded, "Are you still here?"

Harry turned woodenly and shambled out of the hospital wing, not looking or caring where he went next.

## 33: The Downward Spiral

Chapter 33 of 50

Recent events take their toll on Harry's spirits.

Harry looked for Tura at the staff table every meal until she finally reappeared two days later. After that, he stopped eating in the Great Hall. He wouldn't set foot in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, even while Moody was teaching.

A spotted owl brought a letter to him in the common room that first Friday. It was from Tura, tersely stating that his assistance was no longer needed for the Remedial Defense class on Sunday mornings. He crumpled it up and threw it into the fire, and let the little owl pick through the rest of the breakfast that Dobby had brought to him.

He knew it was only a matter of time before his friends accosted him. They spent the first week glancing at him and talking amongst themselves, and he would have been happy to let it go on indefinitely, but there was no such luck. On Sunday, Hermione approached him with a determined look in her eyes, and he knew there was no escape.

"Come for a walk with me, Harry, will you?" she said in a disarmingly quiet tone.

He had a choice. He could refuse, and she would ask again more demandingly, and it would rapidly spiral into an ugly confrontation right there in the common room for everyone to watch. That would end in hurt feelings and embarrassment, and he didn't want to hurt Hermione, any more than he'd meant to hurt Tura. "Coming," he said, though he dragged his feet as he followed her through the portrait hole.

She walked all the way up to the Owlery without speaking. It was cold up there, but not unbearable; apparently it was being heated for the benefit of owls not hardy to the local climate. Hedwig hooted, genuinely happy to see him. In the way of animals who have come to know humankind, she intuitively sensed that this was not the time for mischief, and swooped over right away to politely offer her leg. She looked disappointed that he had no letter for her to deliver. Harry patted his pockets and discovered the shortbread that Fawkes had pilfered from the Headmistress's office, a bit stale and cracked but still quite edible, particularly for a creature whose idea of a delicacy was an unpeeled mouse. Hedwig gently took it from his fingers, without her usual ornery nip.

"Well?" said Hermione, leaning back against a stone ledge full of old nests and broken eggshells.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. At least it was the truth.

Surprisingly, she answered, "I see," but he knew he wouldn't get off that easily. "You know we're all worried about you, don't you, Harry?"

He sighed. "You don't need to."

"You're not eating anymore."

"I eat. Dobby brings me food."

"Dobby brings food to you, and he takes almost all of it away, too. I asked him to use a Wildfire Whiz-Bang as a garnish on Friday's lunch, which was also served to you on Saturday and again today. Had you picked up your sandwich, it would have gone off."

Busted. Harry hadn't even lifted the warming lid over his lunches. He shrugged. "I'm not eating as much. I stuffed myself over the holidays."

"You do know Ron tends to go to bed late, and Neville gets up early?"

After seven years of being their roommate, Harry knew exactly what time each of them got up, brushed their teeth, went to bed, and generally began snoring. "Yeah."

"Neither of them have seen you asleep all week," said Hermione. "You stay up late with the light on in your bed, and you're gone before Neville wakes up in the morning." It was a statement, it was true, and Harry felt no need to comment.

Hermione stared at him, rallying for the final showdown. "Harry. I admittedly was a bit distracted last weekend, but I saw how you and Professor Ondossi were getting on. And now you're not going to her class, not helping her on Sundays, not eating, not sleeping..."

Harry ran his hands through his hair. "Look. It didn't work out. She's a professor, after all. I thought... I don't know what I thought. But it doesn't matter; she doesn't want me."

Hermione raised her brows, her mouth drawn into a skeptical pout. "I see. That certainly explains why she went to the Hog's Head and picked a *fist-fight*, of all things, just at the same time your mood turned sour."

Harry winced; the story of Tura's injury was growing more fantastic over time. "Yeah, well, you'll have to ask her about that. She's the only mind I can't read."

"I'm asking you, Harry."

"Well, don't!" he snapped impatiently. "I told you I don't want to talk about it. I'm disappointed, all right? I've spent a lot of time with her lately, and I thought there might be something there between us, but there just isn't. It stinks, but there you are. You'll have to excuse me for not acting like Mr. Merry Sunshine in the aftermath."

"Well, neither is she, which you'd know if you came to class! Harry, you need to go talk to her, try to settle your differences--"

"NO!" he barked, then ground his teeth until he could speak quietly. "There's no need to talk. We understand each other perfectly. I just can't see her right now, Hermione. Maybe she's mad because I'm skiving her class, I don't know." Every word made his stomach burn; he hated lying to Hermione.

"Fine, then," Hermione said, her icy tone clarifying that things were about as far from fine as one could get. "You can insult my intelligence, I don't mind. I'll just trot back to the common room and tell everyone not to fret, there's nothing amiss about you sulking all night and taking your meals by yourself, or *not* taking them, which is more accurate. And when Ondossi snaps at us like a rabid Blast-Ended Skrewt, we'll just relax, knowing that even though she's taking it out on all of *us*, she's really only angry with *you*." She gave him a stiff smile and started down the stairs.

"Hermione..." He owed her more than that; he had to tell her something, but what? "Look. Obviously there were hard feelings," he said, stalling for time, searching for some

partial explanation that wouldn't be a lie. "I think... Do you remember her 'angel,' the one who first taught her Occlumency? He was captured by Voldemort a year ago. She heard he was still alive over the summer, but nothing since. She got quite upset when the subject came up."

Hermione slowly nodded, ascending the stairs back into the Owlery proper. "So spending a day on the back of your broom and holding hands in the tea shop made her feel guilty. Oh, Harry, that's terrible! The poor dear! Without knowing whether he's alive or dead, she can't move on, it would feel like a betrayal."

This was sounding good. Harry knew if he simply clammed up and let Hermione run with the concept, it would take on a life of its own. "That could be right," he ventured.

It worked. The sternness left Hermione's eyes, replaced by empathy and kindness. "Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry." She took a step toward him with her arms open, but he shrank away.

"Don't," he said. She stopped in mid stride and stared at him in confusion. "I just... Please, Hermione. Just leave me alone. For now." *I don't deserve your tenderness.*

She averted her gaze. "All right. I'll leave you be, but you're not alone, Harry Potter. We're all right here, when you're ready." She stretched out her arm and gave his shoulder a little squeeze. "Come on," she said, heading for the stairs.

"I'll be along in a minute, I... have some post." He beckoned to Hedwig, who abandoned her shortbread and landed on his arm. Hermione departed with a shrug.

"Hello, girl," he said, ruffling the small round feathers on her head. She twittered contentedly and stretched her neck, inviting him to skritch under her chin. "I'll have a letter for you in a minute, but I have to write it first."

Parchment. He patted down his pockets again, hoping he had something to write on. The only thing he found was the Marauder's Map. *Dad made this so it would never lie*, he thought. He folded it carefully and tucked it back into his robes. "I don't suppose you have a spare parchment?" he asked Hedwig. The owl promptly bobbed her head and launched from his arm with a frenzied flap, right through one of the tall windows. She returned a short time later with a small, clean square of parchment in her beak.

"Do I even want to know where you nicked this?" he teased gently. Her disdainful glare nearly brought a smile to his face, the first in a week.

He had a quill, and a small bottle of ink. He stared at the parchment for some time, wondering what he could possibly say. *I'm sorry, Tura. I've never been sorrier in my life, not for anything I've ever done. I don't even know why I did it. Can you forgive me?* Will you? He couldn't write any of them down; none of them could adequately express what was in his heart.

"I'm sorry, Hedwig," Harry finally said. "I can't concentrate." He smoothed her feathers back in place, then returned to Gryffindor Tower.

The Fat Lady smiled kindly at him, but before he could give the password, she said, "Don't bother, dearie. Professor Ondossi wants to see you in her office right away. She told me not to let you in until you came to her." Her smile became apologetic. "I have to do as she says, young man, but I don't know why she'd even ask such a thing."

"Because I've been skiving her class," he said simply, and headed for the dungeon.

Her door was wide open, and a cauldron bubbled thickly on the small laboratory bench in the corner. Tura was scratching furiously at some essays. *Essays?* he thought. *She never assigns essays.*

"Moody did that," she said without looking up. "Now I'm stuck grading them. I think he did that on purpose. Sit." She finished the parchment she was working on, covering it with green ink. "Kid's got the facts right," she noted grudgingly, setting down her quill. "But he hasn't a clue about punctuation." She folded her hands atop the desk and eyed him coolly.

"You're avoiding me," she finally said. "Explain yourself."

Harry's recent attempt to write the note proved that he had no simple answer to give, and the complete one was too painful to say aloud. She continued to stare, then to his chagrin, picked up her wand.

"All right," she said, her voice throaty and deliberate. "You may have lost all respect for me, but you *will* come to my class. *Don't* make me complain to your Head of House--you know how Hagrid is, it'll get messy."

Harry had to speak up. "Tura, no. That's not it at all... Please."

She studied him a moment, then set down her wand again. "So it's regret, is it, that's keeping you away? Not contempt?"

"Regret," he stammered. "That's a good start."

Unsmiling, she responded, "Need a thesaurus?"

Harry shook his head, closing his eyes and clearing his throat. "Tura, I'm so ashamed. If there were a single Time-Turner left in the Department of Mysteries, I'd go back and wring my own neck."

She sighed aloud, sitting back ever so slightly in her chair. "You can't. The minute you accost your past self, you return to the present. A Squib named Heisenberg figured out why, but I couldn't follow the argument." She sighed again. "I get your point, though. That's good. I'm glad you're ashamed. You did a terrible thing; your conscience *should* bother you."

In rare form, she seemed to be waiting for him to reply. "Got that covered," he finally rasped, fighting back tears which had been threatening since Hermione had shepherd him to the Owlery.

She nodded. "As it happens, I've been thinking, and mine's bothering me a bit as well."

Harry raised his head. "You've done nothing wrong--"

Tura spoke over him sharply. "Don't interrupt!" She scowled until he shrank meekly into his chair, then she continued. "The other night at the Hospital Wing, I was angry and afraid, and I wouldn't let you speak. I assumed the worst of you, that you were going to use my identity to blackmail me. I said some things that were both cruel and unfounded. I never met Albus Dumbledore. I don't know anything about his motives or reasons, but I do know you cared about him. I suggested that he was manipulating you just to... well, just to distract you, so you'd leave me alone."

"Tura," Harry began, but once again she cut him off with a stern glare.

"Let me finish! You look awful. I noticed you haven't been coming to meals. You've lost weight, and your eyes are all bloodshot and droopy. What I said hit you hard, didn't it? I could see it in your eyes at the time--you looked like you'd been shot. At the time I was glad, because you went away, but now I'm not glad. I'm sor--."

As soon as he heard it coming, Harry leapt to his feet, raising his hands before his face as though he could block the words from his ears. "DON'T! Don't apologize to me for being afraid, after... I owe you the apology, Tura." The tears finally won the battle, overflowing in a sudden rush of grief. "I don't even know where to start; nothing I can say even begins to..." His voice withered away and he hung his head, unable to stop sobbing.

"Sit," she said quietly, and he obeyed. She waited silently as he fought to regain his composure. It took some time, and it was all nearly undone again when she finally said,

"You really did care, didn't you?"

His knuckles whitened around the arms of the chair. "I *do* care."

She narrowed her eyes. "No you don't," she said matter-of-factly with a dismissive wave. "But that's not important. What matters now is that I've undercut your trust in Dumbledore, and that wasn't my place. Listen to me, Potter." Her tone was firm and practiced, the one she used in the classroom. "Your aunt and uncle raised you to feel unwanted. I don't know why they chose that; neither do you. They had their own reasons, and we can speculate all day long on what those were. Jealousy, resentment, just-plain-no-goodniks--or maybe something we'd never guess in a million years. Maybe you're uncle's a Death Eater and he's been totally freaked out about how he's going to explain the situation to Lord Voldemort." Neither of them smiled, but both made a small sniffing sound, a hint of a chortle.

"The point, though, is that they took this sweet, perfect little baby, and they imposed upon him their view that he was no good, that he was less deserving than Diddlykins or whatever they call that meatloaf cousin of yours. They did it *for their own reasons*, which had nothing to do with who you actually are, Harry. In fact, I'll bet they put more thought into buying a new car or a new fridge than into why, exactly, they treated you the way they did.

"Just for a minute, Harry, I want you to imagine your life if you *hadn't* turned out to be a wizard--if you hadn't been pulled out of that suffocating, demeaning environment. I don't know how you might have turned out, but I'd imagine it would've taken quite a toll on you, don't you think?"

Harry swallowed. He wasn't quite sure what point Tura was trying to make, but he obediently spent a moment envisioning what it would have been like to grow up all these years as a Muggle in the Dursley household. Once Dudley left for Smeltings, it might not have been so bad, for at least the daily bullying would stop. Then again, without Dudley to distract his aunt and uncle, they would have had more time to focus on Harry's "faults." He could easily picture the three of them at the kitchen table every night, eating meals that he prepared after school. On a *good* evening, his uncle would read the paper and dine without comment, while *atypical* evening would involve complaints about the food, the table settings, his grades, his appearance, his worthlessness... Harry twitched his head violently to shake the image from his mind; it was ugly. Once he was too big to fit in the cupboard under the stairs, he probably would have run away and lived in the streets and alleys of London.

"Worse than the steam tunnels," Tura remarked knowingly. "But that's neither here nor there, because you *are* a wizard, and you didn't have to live that nightmare that your relatives chose for you. Instead, you came here and lived this life." She paused meaningfully.

"I said that Dumbledore spent the last six years manipulating you. When you look at the surface, that seems true. But I want you to really think about this for a minute, Harry.

"You escaped your relatives NOT because of Dumbledore, but because of Wizard law, established centuries ago, that entitles all magical children to be educated here. Once you were here, probably the single most influential decision in your whole life was made, NOT by Dumbledore, but by that mangy old Sorting Hat. It even gave you a say in the matter when you begged against Slytherin--even though all you knew about the house of my ancestor was what Hagrid had told you."

She paused with a rueful glance, and for a moment Harry felt somewhat awed, as he had when he'd first heard Elias Ravenclaw say his name. He suddenly felt a kinship with the original Founders, for he'd never been able to really comprehend why they welcomed a Dark wizard into their midst. Perhaps Tura embodied the *real* essence of Salazar Slytherin, before he became obsessed with bloodlines and purity: tenacious and cunning, but not hateful.

"The ways your relatives treated you--and the things the Dark Lord did to you--were obviously wrong, so it's easy to recognize them as manipulations. On the other hand, the Hat's decision has worked for you, Harry, so you've never resented it--even though it cut a huge swath through your future. So where does 'guiding' end and 'manipulating' begin? Such things aren't always cut-and-dried.

"Dumbledore knew the Prophecy. He knew you were destined for great and terrible things. So he allowed slightly lesser things happen to you without interceding. Does that mean he was turning you into a weapon, or was he preparing you for what ultimately lay ahead? Most parents teach their kids to swim, just in case they ever find themselves in water. Is that manipulating? Or just good sense?"

She sighed heavily. "Dumbledore may have had good reasons for letting you face such dangerous people alone. Or maybe he just found himself frozen with indecision most of the time. He was a great wizard, but he was never a parent. Taking care of one little boy up close is different from managing hundreds from the staff table.

"Do you understand now that I was wrong to say that Dumbledore has been making you his tool? You don't need to feel like your relationship with the old man was all a lie. I said it because I was angry, but I didn't know what I was talking about. It was oversimplified and unfair. So I want you to quit doubting, quit laying awake at night, quit being miserable, and all that. Will you?"

Harry cleared his throat. "I'll think about what you've said."

She nodded. "Will you come back to my class?"

That was a lot to ask. It was still taking a significant act of will to maintain his composure, for every time he looked at her he envisioned his handprint on her throat. "Will you forgive me for hurting you?"

Pulling her arms in over her chest and tummy, she answered in a quiet, bitter tone. "It's already forgiven, Harry. But I don't... Things can't be like they were."

A cold fist closed around the base of his throat and squeezed itself all the way along the length of his gut. "Things," he said. "Is there nothing left between us, then?"

She bowed her head, staring at the essay on the desk before her. "I don't mean there's nothing. But it's not the same. I mean... there has to be trust. I believed you wouldn't let me fall, Harry. For one bright day, I believed it. But it was an illusion. Nothing my *father* touches can stay whole or good for long."

She looked up again. "You're sad. I am too. We both lost something special. Here." She opened the top drawer of the desk and pulled out something tiny; Harry recognized it in an instant from the general size and color. It was the key he'd given her, the chain wrapped tightly around it in a glittering ball. "I can't keep this anymore." She made a tossing motion with her hand, threw it to him.

Harry caught it woodenly, his eyes brimming with tears once again. He stood up and approached the lab bench. "Is this FrostBreak salve?" he asked, his voice gravelly and tight.

"Madam Pomfrey used up all she had on me," Tura said, picking up her quill with a meaningful glance at the stack of essays.

Harry had brewed FrostBreak salve last year in Slughorn's class. It had to be made in a black iron cauldron, for it would dissolve all shiny metals instantly. The Half-Blood Prince had, as usual, left comments in the margins of his textbook, noting that silver and gold seemed to enhance its healing properties, but were far too expensive to be included routinely.

Harry dropped the key into the gurgling cauldron. "I won't be needing it anymore," he mumbled to himself, and left the dungeon.

His feet felt like lead, and he paid so little attention that he landed hard on the trick step and sunk into it up to his knee. He stared at it blankly, lacking the energy at that point to curse the fool thing, much less struggle with it. Within a few seconds, though, a beautiful, distant note filtered down through the staircase and the step released him not just instantly, but gently. *Fawkes*, Harry thought listlessly. *He really is in charge here.*

By the time Harry had reached the sixth floor landing, he heard the pounding feet of someone coming up quickly behind him. "Whit like, Harry!" came a cheery, if somewhat out-of-breath, voice of Elias Ravenclaw from the landing below. "Hing on, I'm in the way o' Gryffindor meself." He darted up the intervening flight of stairs and clapped Harry jovially on the back. He was carrying a small package wrapped in Christmas paper covered with cardinals preening themselves on fir boughs. "Got a wee Yuil giftie for

Ginny!" he announced, giving the package a smart pat.

He took a closer look at Harry and a bit of the spring left his step. "You're no weel, are ye no? Ye look terrible, Harry."

"It's nothing," he muttered, resuming his climb.

"Nocht, aye. Tha's why yeh haen't been to class all week, eh?"

Harry generally enjoyed listening to Elias speak about anything in his lilting dialect, but this line of questioning had grown old over the course of the day. "Don't go on, Elias," Harry said. "If you want to harp on me about that, you'll have to get in the queue like everyone else."

The good-natured Scot laughed aloud and patted him again. "I'll be leaving it to the pros, then."

Harry ushered Elias through the portrait hole, intending to head straight to his room, but Ron and Hermione intercepted him at the spiral staircase. Ron gave him a brief, apologetic shrug as Hermione eyed him with concern. "Everything okay, Harry?" she asked, making his stomach tighten. The last thing he wanted was Hermione mothering him protectively in the midst of all this.

"I'm fine." He forced himself to slow down and look her in the eye. "Really, I'm fine. We talked a little. She understands now, why I'm not in class. I think she'll lighten up a bit on the rest of you."

From behind Hermione, Ron tipped his head to raise his eyes to the heavens and gave Harry a silent thumbs up. Hermione closed her eyes and grated. "Ron, you might notice the reflections in Harry's glasses sometime." She resumed her look of matronly concern for Harry and said somewhat hesitantly, "I may have figured out who she's pining for, Harry. Do you want to hear it?"

*Great*, he thought, wishing he'd never thrown Hermione a red herring. But he was a tad curious about this mystery man, rival or no. "Sure."

Hermione hunched her shoulders down and spoke even more quietly. "Now, I'm not completely certain, because not all the dates add up cleanly, but some of them are a bit cryptic." Harry rolled his eyes impatiently, making her scowl. "The key point is that Ondossi heard news of him *over the summer*. Well, in August, the three of us made a report to Headquarters that Fortescue had come to the Green Dragon Inn at Godric's Hollow."

"Of course!" said Ron. "Calliope--the ice cream man!"

Hermione nodded. "There can't be many wizards who have been kidnapped by Voldemort and were later spotted alive. I can only think of Fortescue, actually, though there may have been others in the past. But I'm quite sure that he's the only victim who reappeared over the summer!"

"The *Prophet* would have put it all over the front page if they'd known someone had 'escaped' from Voldemort," said Ron. "Scrimgeour would have made it sound like the Aurors had sprung him on a secret rescue mission."

"And if anyone else had been spotted by the Order, we would have heard of it by now," agreed Hermione. "You probably would have learned it from Professor Lupin, even if he didn't speak it aloud," she added, tapping her forehead meaningfully.

Harry scrunched up his face in a thoughtful scowl. "But Fortescue disappeared before our 6th year even started, and Tura said it had been *a year* since she'd spoken to him."

"I know," said Hermione. "That doesn't quite fit."

Ron shrugged. "We know Voldemort was sending Fortescue on missions back into Wizard society. Maybe the poor bloke was sent to Northport a year ago. For all we know, Voldemort might have sent him as a courier to Ondossi herself!"

"Fortescue knew a lot about the History of Magic," began Harry uneasily, "but I never heard a word about him being an Occlumens."

"I imagine that's the whole point," said Hermione. "I mean, you want to be so skilled at Occlumency that no one, not even a Legilimens, can tell you're doing it."

Harry started to reply, but just then a shriek cut through the conversation. They turned as one to the source, discovering to their surprise that it came from Ginny Weasley, who was staring in horror at something on the floor. Ron dashed across the common room to his sister's side. "What hap--" he began, ending in a gasp as he followed her gaze downward. He halted so abruptly that Harry and Hermione nearly skidded into his back.

From their vantage point, neither Harry nor Hermione could see the object that had caused such consternation until Elias leaned over and picked it up. It was his Christmas present, the wrapping paper torn off in one corner. Ginny's eyes were fixed upon it, and she backed away until she ran into Ron and Harry. Elias, however, gaped at her in utter bewilderment. "Are ye takkin me on, Gin?" he said almost pleadingly. "It's a book, na?"

Unsure what the fuss was about, Harry glanced at Ron, who was aiming his wand at the befuddled Scot and looked but a hair shy of jinxing him into the hospital wing. Harry put a swift hand on Ron's wrist to keep him from doing something rash. "What the devil, Ron? Have you both gone spare?" he asked, glancing back at Elias to make sure Ron hadn't done a nonverbal spell. Elias had, in the meantime, removed the rest of the wrapping from his gift and was holding it aloft for all to see that it was nothing dangerous.

The sight of the thin black book, however, almost led Harry to draw his own wand. "Where'd you get that?" he said, his voice low but controlled.

Elias's shocked expression widened even further. "It's a buik, man! A family heirloom! Ma ever-so-greet gran had a thing for buiks, as ye might imagine. She lef' us an enchanted case, what's ever makin' nui buiks!" His voice softened into a plea for insight. "It's a gift, Gin. Nothin' ta mak ye tak the hurt."

Hermione nodded and came around Ginny and the boys. "May I see it, Elias?" she asked kindly, bringing obvious relief to his eyes. She examined the front cover closely as soon as he handed it over, then flipped through the blank pages and peered at the back before addressing them all.

"I never got a good look at the original, but this seems to be an exact replica in every way except the year. Look," she said, pointing to the gold writing on the bottom corner of the cover. "1998. The other was dated 1950." She gleamed triumphantly.

"Other? What are you on abet, Hermione?" said Elias.

Harry was catching on, and beckoned to Hermione to hand him the book. He, too, peered closely at the front and back, then showed it to Ron and Ginny with a comforting nod. "We've seen a book like this once before," he explained. "It had been, um, cursed, and it caused quite a bit of trouble before we destroyed it. Especially for Ginny here."

"Cursed? Niver!" said Elias loudly. "I told ye, these are the legacy of Rowena Ravenclaw herself! Wha' wizard can corrupt *her* magic, I'd like ta know?"

Harry gestured with his hand for Elias to quiet down, and put his arm confidentially around the Scot's shoulder. "I think we need to let you in on a little secret."

The Order of the Phoenix had kept silent about the Horcruxes. It had become a worldwide organization and comprised many members of Wizard governments, but all knowledge of Voldemort's most precious relics was protected by the Fidelius Charm. Lupin had been made the Secret-Keeper within hours of reading Dumbledore's will, and though he had spread the word amongst other leaders in the Order, he made sure the press would not learn of any aspect of the Horcruxes. Spreading the news



widely might have helped the searching process, but word would undoubtedly get back to Voldemort and there was no telling what he might do to protect his links to immortality. The Dark Army must believe that the Wizarding World was blissfully unaware of the Horcruxes.

Harry-and-Viktor, Ron, and Hermione accompanied Elias to the Headmistress's office and soon persuaded her to Floo Lupin at Headquarters. Lupin was a bit distracted, but focused on Harry when he said, "It's about the Order's Secret." From the hearth, he could see that there was an unknown wizard with Harry, and he immediately abandoned his current project and stepped through the Floo in a puff of emerald flame.

"I'm Remus Lupin," he said, offering a hand to Elias, though he was gazing sidelong at Harry. He jolted and ogled in the usual fashion when he heard the young wizard's name. "Of course. The maniac Beater," he stammered, covering up his surprise.

"The same," said Elias with a winsome smile.

"Elias brought us a family heirloom," said Hermione, holding up the thin black book. "One of a set, made by his ancestor Rowena Ravenclaw."

Slackjawed, Lupin took it from her and examined it carefully. "I see," he murmured, rifling slowly through the first few pages." He eyed "the maniac Beater" with even more reverence. "Mr. Ravenclaw," he said, "This is a matter of grave importance." He turned to the others. "Can he be trusted?"

Harry turned to Elias and penetrated his mind with a feeling of distaste, but he knew it was an utter necessity. He found exactly what he expected to find: an honest man with a heart of gold who was already quite in love with Ginny Weasley. Snapping back into himself, he felt the onset of numbness, even as he noticed Elias blanch and take several steps backwards. "Yes."

Lupin grimaced, undoubtedly recalling his own experiences with Harry's magic, and asked Elias kindly, "Do you know of the Order of the Phoenix?"

Elias gulped. "I ken."

"This issue is a Secret of the Order. If you're to be a part of it, you must become a member, do you understand?"

The younger wizard drew himself to his full height. "Aye. It had be an honor, Mr. Lupin."

Harry confirmed his sincerity with but a delicate brush against his mind. "I support this candidate," he said.

Krum cleared his throat. "Also I support this candidate." Ron and Hermione glanced at one another uneasily; they had never seen a new member brought into the Order. Harry hadn't either, but it had been present in Lupin's mind many times over. He'd picked up the procedure without even realizing it.

And Harry himself had nominated Krum for the Order, but Viktor had also gone through the formal induction process. Thus he knew the routine.

Tossing an errant strand of hair from his eyes, Lupin smiled at Elias. "Very good. Will you swear to serve the Order of the Phoenix, Elias Ravenclaw?"

"I so swear," he answered solemnly.

With that, the formality ended. "Welcome, then," said Lupin, squeezing the younger wizard's shoulders with a warm grin. The entire room seemed suffused with warmth, and all of them spent a moment hugging or patting Elias and one another. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Dumbledore's portrait smile blissfully, before settling back into the facade of sleep.

Lupin proceeded with a very brief explanation about the Horcruxes. He said only that they concealed part of Voldemort's soul, and that they expected to find Horcruxes made out of artifacts from each of the Hogwarts Founders. He didn't mention the link between the Horcruxes and Voldemort's immortality, nor that they suspected a total of six existed. Even though the secret was protected by the Fidelius Charm, Lupin apparently wasn't divulging any more than necessary. Harry wondered if the people in that room were the only ones besides Voldemort himself that knew the full truth. *And Tura*, he reminded himself; she had lifted the facts straight from the Dark Lord's mind.

"No one understood why Voldemort chose to use a book," Lupin concluded. "Knowing that it was a relic of Rowena Ravenclaw's would solve a huge riddle. Elias, if there's any doubt in your mind that this diary is authentic, you *must* tell us. Our strategy will depend on your answer, and we can't afford to be wrong."

"Understood," said the Scot. "I won't let you daen."

Lupin nodded. "This was the original diary," he said, reaching into his robes and bringing forth a bundle wrapped in brown paper. "It was recovered in the raid on Malfoy Manor, after Draco and his mother disappeared." With a tap of his wand, the cover unfurled, and Lupin gave Harry a meaningful look. Harry had returned the ruined book to Lucius Malfoy with a sock inside it, setting Dobby free of his former master. He shuddered, realizing that if Malfoy had returned it to *his* master, Voldemort would know that one of his Horcruxes had been destroyed.

Elias gasped aloud at the sight of the mangled cover, clearly unused to seeing their beloved heirloom treated so badly. He examined it dutifully, even prying apart the binding and rubbing the pages between his fingertips. "Not a doubt," he said firmly. "They're all the same, an I been writin' in them a lang time." He shook his head. "Mum and Gran wad cry their eyes oot to see this."

"Have you noticed any of them missing?" said Lupin.

"Na. The shelf's enchanted. Take one daen, another takes its place. We don't give them oot to just anyone, mind, but they're for sharing. Rowena's wish, ye ken--any that wants to read or write can do it."

Lupin pointed at the "Vauxhall Rd" imprint on the back cover of the ruined diary. "Do you have any idea how this one turned up in a shop in Muggle London?"

Elias shook his head. "None. We don't give them to just anybody, but they do leave the family now and again." Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Viktor each squirmed awkwardly at this confession. Their friend had offered a rare boon to Ginny, and been treated like a criminal for it.

"Thank you, Elias," said Lupin with warmth and sincerity, shaking his hand. He then began gathering up the diary and hastily rolling it back into the brown paper. "I'm afraid I must return to Headquarters; I'll have to give you a proper welcome into the Order another day."

Five pairs of eyebrows raised in curiosity. "Something good in the works?" asked Ron.

Lupin's face softened into a rare and tender smile. "Indeed, Ron, but not what you think. Adora and I are making wedding plans." With a wink and a pinch of Floo powder, he was gone.

The events of the day perked Harry up enough to spend the afternoon in the common room, but by dinnertime, the energy had drained away again. Against the protests of his friends, he asked Dobby to bring him a supper tray. Alone in his dormitory, he fed most of it to Fawkes. The phoenix glared at him, but reluctantly accepted the food. Harry got the impression that Fawkes would much rather see him eat it, but complied with the deception out of pure loyalty. "It's all right, Fawkes," he said when his familiar shoved a chunk of roast beef back toward him with his beak. "I'll try to have something later, when I'm hungry."

There were times, over the next few weeks, when Harry felt hungry, and he usually managed to put away a few bites of fruit or bread-and-butter when those moments came along. Mostly he felt vaguely sick to his stomach. Though tired all the time, he slept little, but made a point of turning out his light well before Ron came to bed. Night after night, he lay in the dark, thinking about Tura and Dumbledore, murder and fate.

He got up dutifully in the morning and went to classes, with the exception of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Ron mentioned that they were working on resisting the

Imperius Curse, something Harry had already mastered. He muddled through most of his homework and, if his stomach permitted it, occasionally went down to the Great Hall at mealtimes. He held Quidditch practice, though his heart was miles away from the game and his gaze kept straying to the area of Tura's sleeping porch. The cold weather gave the entire team watery eyes as they practiced, for which Harry was truly grateful. When he lost the Snitch to the Ravenclaw seeker in their next match, however, Viktor Krum met him at the exit of the changing room with a determined look in his eye.

"Come," Krum said bluntly, turning on his heel and striding briskly for the front gates of Hogwarts. Harry had to trot to keep up.

"Where are we going?"

"Headquarters," Krum said, equally bluntly.

"What's happening?" said Harry, stopping in his tracks, but Viktor said nothing, just waved him along impatiently without even looking back. Harry swore under his breath, then charged through the snow after his bodyguard.

Once outside the Hogwarts grounds, they Apparated to Grimmauld Place, which looked as unperturbed as ever. Harry's first thought was that there had been an attack, so the everyday appearance gave him a rush of relief, but as soon as the front door swung open, his hackles rose anew. Lupin, Tonks, Hagrid, Sirius, a gaggle of Weasleys, and even Professor McGonagall lined the foyer, and Viktor tipped his head to them in greeting without a hint of surprise. *Oh, no*, Harry thought. Hauling him into an unannounced meetings was not the Order's style; he had a bad feeling that he would have refused to attend if he'd known in advance.

They filed quietly past the sleeping portraits in the hallway and proceeded to the drawing room. When Harry saw that the chairs were arranged into a circle, he knew he was about to be grilled. Sirius put an arm around his shoulder and steered him to the loveseat, sitting down beside him without letting go.

McGonagall and Lupin exchanged a few glances, then she spoke. "I'm sure you're wondering what this is all about, Mr. Potter." He let his shoulders sag and looked her in the eye to read her foremost thoughts. Though he was quite sure he didn't need to bother, he did the same to all present.

"You're afraid," he said resignedly. "You've noticed I've been acting different, and you think I'm finally falling apart from the strain."

Sirius squeezed his shoulder tightly. "Not as bad as all that, Harry," he said. "The Order can only stand one of us moping about in despair at a given time, you know. And I'm currently holding that position."

One of the Weasley twins added, "Besides, you're practically our mascot. People will lose faith in their Wizarding Wheezes if you stop smiling."

Harry had to smirk at that; he'd refused to be the poster boy for Scrimgeour, but Fred and George naturally hadn't given him that choice. Several of the others bowed their heads to hide a grin, but McGonagall flattened her lips and plowed onward in a more serious tone.

"You are acting strangely, Mr. Potter. You've skipped meals and classes, and your homework has fallen from its usual standards. I understand you are rarely seen even in the common room of Gryffindor House. And today..." She hesitated, flattening her lips in an obvious attempt to phrase herself carefully.

Viktor, however, took the opportunity to finish for her. "You let an easy win slip away from you, Harry." He wagged his finger at Harry as one might chastise a puppy who piddled on the rug.

Funny, that the issues of his mood, homework, or eating induced him to bristle defensively, but the Quidditch loss made him hang his head in regret. "My form's off," he mumbled.

Professor McGonagall rolled her eyes, apparently noticing the relative importance of the Quidditch match. "Is there something we should know, Mr. Potter?"

*Absolutely not*, he thought, but said only, "No."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed in her coldest Headmistress's glare, making Harry squirm uncomfortably in his seat. "I want you to think about your answer, Mr. Potter," she began, in her most clipped, precise tone. "We have summoned you here today out of concern for you--and not just ours, but that of your friends and roommates at Hogwarts. They are beginning to fear for your health and safety."

"We in this room are uniquely aware of the pressure you are under." She paused to indicate the others in the room with her hands. Harry glanced around as each of them nodded or grinned at him. "We are also very fond of you, Harry," she added in a kinder tone. "We are all willing to help you--you need but ask."

Again she paused, then set her jaw. "You will be staying here with your godfather for a few days, until he and Mr. Lupin are satisfied that you are eating again. I would encourage you to look around this room, Mr. Potter, and take note of all the people in whom you might confide. I know you often seek counsel from Miss Granger and Ron Weasley, but in this instance, they are out of their league and do not know what to do. Please do not make the mistake of assuming that, because your very best friends are unable to help you, no one can."

She ended her speech with a prim little sniff, then came over to Harry and gave him a tiny kiss on the cheek. "You may certainly Floo me in my office or my quarters any time, Mr. Potter, if you wish to speak," she said quietly as the others began to rise, then departed through the fireplace.

Bill, Arthur, and Molly Weasley bid their adieu next. Mrs. Weasley had tears in her eyes. "I'm going to come here every meal and cook for you, Harry, get you back on your feet. You're as thin as your broomstick, love." She, too, kissed his cheek. Bill dropped to one knee briefly to remind him that he was the Bonder at their wedding and would always be part of their family. By the time they turned to go, Harry wished he had a huge black bag to put over his head.

Hagrid, thankfully, came off as his usual self, mussing Harry's hair with an oversized hand and grinning cheerfully. "Door's always open, Harry, yeh know tha'," he said. "Fang'd love it if yeh'd come by, too. He's a surprisin' good listener."

Fred and George invited him to visit the shop, and Lupin and Tonks affirmed that he could speak to them anytime. Viktor said nothing, but shook Harry's hand warmly and pulled the drawing room door shut behind him as he departed. Harry was left with Sirius, whose arm had never left his shoulder. The two of them sat watching the fire burn for a long time.

"Shall we talk tonight or tomorrow?" said Sirius at last.

Harry let his head fall forward, stretching his taut neck. "Maybe later, all right? Let me think of how to say it."

"Fair enough," Sirius said, then kissed him on the temple. "I wasn't much of a father to you, Harry, but I do make a pretty good friend."

*Who'd have known I'd ever wish for fewer friends*, Harry mused.

He woke the next morning and managed to put away a scone for Mrs. Weasley, who was quite serious about her resolution to fatten him back up. Other than that, however, the Order went about its business as usual, for which Harry was profoundly grateful; he didn't know how many kindly smiles or sympathetic glances he could stand. He finally roused Viktor out from behind the sports section of the *Prophet* and Flooed over to the Ministry. As long as he was stuck in London, he might as well check in on Percy.

The reception witch on Level One kept them waiting in the lobby for nearly an hour before she finally authorized them to come up to the floor. Viktor smirked, muttering something about "bureaucrat's revenge," but didn't give her so much as a glance as they passed her desk. Percy threw open the door when they were halfway down the corridor, motioning them to hurry inside.

"Great Mother of Merlin, Harry, it's like an avalanche, but worse," said Percy as he reset the wards on his door. Mrs. Weasley had obviously been fattening him up as well, and he looked somewhat better rested, but he still twitched nervously at every little sound or movement. He bustled them over to his desk, which was covered with stacks of parchment; a huge diagram of names, dates, and reference numbers covered the wall behind him.

"I'm beginning to feel like the more I look, the less I know!" he exclaimed, trying ineffectively to shove a stack to one side, then quickly giving up--there was simply no way to clear a space on his desk, at least without a wand or a flamethrower. "I'm no closer to solving the Azkaban issue than I was two months ago. Father put some Aurors to work on it--I gather they're also in the Order--but we've had to keep it hush-hush."

"They tried to suss out the traitor last week when the monthly supply cargo was sent to Azkaban. Unfortunately, practically everything's been automated--ordering, billing--it's *supposed* to be checked by hand, but nothing's changed in hundreds of years, and even if there's a mistake, no one from Azkaban ever complains. If my hands weren't tied by the need for secrecy, I could practically fill this office with quills that have been enchanted to mark up various forms (in triplicate). It's no wonder I see people loitering about the coffee service all day--I'm beginning to wonder if anyone actually works here!"

Viktor laughed aloud, then apologized. After pausing to give Krum a brief, quizzical look, Percy continued. "They followed the supply shipment all the way to the North Sea and waited to see what would happen. After the ship left, some sort of Portkey went off on the dock, and all of the goods were gone. It must have been set for a certain time, but no one knows how it transported the cargo without taking the dock upon which it sat; normally Portkeys only work on wizards, anyway!"

"Great," sneered Harry. "We've not only sent the Dark Army its soldiers, we're supplying their food as well."

"And if we *stop* sending cargo, they'll know we've caught on," said Percy. "Morgan le Fay, I'm glad I'm not in charge of that decision. I'm not sure what poor Father's going to do. We can't even poison the supplies--I'm sure they test them on their own prisoners before eating them. What a calamity."

Percy stopped and threw his hands in the air. "And of course, that's but *one* sidebar of my investigation of Sirius Black. And all the others are the same way; the whole case is a textbook example of obfuscation! I still have no proof that Pettigrew is alive. His parents believe him dead, and when I asked if they had any knowledge of him being an unregistered Animagus, his lunatic aunt began pelting me with biscuits and had to be restrained! I've officially exhausted the parchment trail in this building regarding Black's sentencing; not one single form remains. I gather you've had no better luck in the attic at Black's former home?"

Harry shook his head. "I suppose they didn't routinely send a copy home for the prisoner as a memento. But there are some... locked and warded places I'm still trying to open."

Percy cocked his head. "Hmph! You might ask Bill over to help you; he's a curse-breaker, after all."

"I might do that," Harry answered, but doubted Bill's experience with Gringotts vaults would get him very far in Sirius's mind.

Percy put his hand on another stack of parchment. "And then there's this, Harry. Naturally, I tried to backtrack to the events leading up to Black's arrest. This stack alone contains sufficient material to send a dozen heads rolling, and yet it's laughable, compared to the rest of this disaster. Although you probably won't think it's nearly so funny, Harry." He sat up a bit straighter with that gleam of insight, and so did Harry.

"Tell me," he said firmly, locking his gaze with Percy's in case he refused.

Percy opened and closed his mouth a few times, then swallowed hard. "All right," he said uneasily. "I know I can trust you." The look in his eyes revealed the unspoken conclusion that he understood quite well that Harry would take it if it were not freely given.

"One of the last sightings of Black prior to his arrest was at... Godric's Hollow," Percy began, eyeing Harry nervously as he named the Potters' family home. "This was according to Hagrid, of course--he told Mr. Fudge years ago that he and Black both arrived at the Hollow that Halloween night, and left before the authorities arrived. He refused to talk about it with me himself, you know. Knowing as I do how Hagrid tends to go on about things, that came as quite a shock. At any rate, Mr. Fudge recalled it quite well--that Hagrid found Black at the scene in hysterics and attempted to comfort the fellow, then departed with the infant... that is, with you.

"I thought I'd see if there was any mention of this story in the *Prophet* at the time." He paused, removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. "Well," he continued, "didn't *that* open a new can of worms! Imagine my surprise, Harry, to find headlines like, 'Boy Who Lived at Ministry! Photos Tomorrow!' Hagrid may not be the brightest candle in the chandelier, but I just don't see him playing coy with the Ministry OR scheduling a photo shoot!"

Percy sighed heavily. "Just what I need. Another mystery. All I wanted to do was find out if anyone else saw Black in Godric's Hollow, and I got another conspiracy. This time, the records of the incident were certainly destroyed in the raid last summer; they were all stored on Level 2, in the Auror's files."

Harry nodded. He had seen the devastation in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement himself; there was no hope of finding the original Auror's reports about Godric's Hollow. Percy continued. "Once again, it's back to witnesses. I don't dare interview anyone who works for the *Prophet*; I think the only reason I'm still alive is that this investigation has been kept secret. But I did manage a bit of snooping, tracked down a retired photographer and such. I can't prove it, but it seems that the Ministry had obtained a different baby, whom they were touting as the Boy Who Lived."

"Interesting," said Harry, keeping his face neutral.

"I'll say! From what I gather, another Ministry employee complained that he'd seen the Potter's child and this other baby was a hoax. I'd give anything to track that one down for an interview, but obviously that was quite an embarrassment at the time and was kept quiet. Dumbledore confirmed that the child... that is, *you* had indeed lived, and they quietly swept this other baby under the rug, so to speak."

"Any idea where the other boy came from?" said Harry, trying desperately not to laugh. The image of Percy discussing this "mystery employee" with his dad was just too much.

"Could be anyone, obviously," sighed Percy. "There weren't any lost or kidnapped children reported in London at that time, but Merlin-only-knows they could have procured the babe anywhere, even from Muggles. The official explanation is that the baby was recovered by the Aurors from Godric's Hollow, but no one seems to remember who found him or who brought him in."

"I'll bet they don't--but I bet all of them have a vague memory of someone taking care of it," Harry mused. "An implant of something that never happened." He looked at Viktor, who gave him the slightest nod. "I think I'd like to interview some of these Aurors, Percy. Maybe the person who implanted the memory got careless, left behind a clue."

"Now just hold on a moment!" said Percy. "You can't go around interrogating people! They wouldn't even speak to you, Harry, you've no authority here. Not to mention I may as well kiss goodbye any hope of keeping my investigation a secret. It has to be me; I'm the only one that can pull it off." He squared his shoulders, not with pride, but with resolution. "And maybe some help from the Order," he added a bit plaintively.

Harry caught himself in the act of protesting, opting instead for a dry smile. "Well, Percy," he said, "that summarized all my years at Hogwarts quite nicely." Grinning more broadly, he picked up the nearest quill and tapped Percy on each shoulder. "I dub thee an Official Flouter of Dark Wizards."

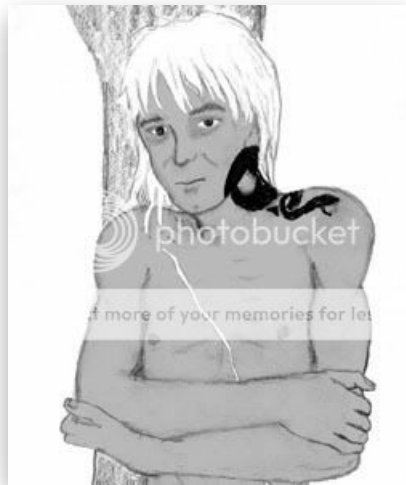
Percy glared over his glasses. "Thanks, Potter. If I survive, we'll have to get matching jackets."



## 34: The Lost Boy

Chapter 34 of 50

In which the adventures of a certain young, blond aristocrat are described.



Another perfect dawn over Polynesia.

A light wind skimmed over the turquoise sea, rustling the stiff leaves of palms along countless shores. The South Pacific was dotted with islands, all telling a similar story. They were born eons ago when a tiny creature came to rest on just the right spot of the ocean floor. It had found a mate, built a home, raised a family, and died. Its skeleton served as the home for some of its offspring, and they repeated the cycle, growing exponentially until the colony became a reef, and the reef broke the surface of the sea and became an island. Stray seeds took up residence quickly in the rich organic matter, and later, birds and insects. Some reefs grew large enough to support larger animals, including men, but not all of them, by far. It was on one of the latter that Draco Malfoy resided.

His skin had turned lobster red the first day, then peeled off him in sheets like a snake's. This left behind not scales, but tan skin that, on him, looked just as alien. The process had repeated several times the first month, until he was brown from head to toe. His hair, however, had taken the opposite tack, becoming pure white. He hadn't thought it could get any lighter, but the tropical sun and sea had overwhelmed its British sensibilities and pigments.

He had lived here alone for over eight months. Voldemort had given him a golden cup that provided his fresh water; his assignment was to keep the cup safe from the rest of the world. "Kill anyone who sets foot on the sand," Voldemort had told him, "unless they bear the Dark Mark. If I ever have need of the cup, I will send a courier; once you have learned where we are to meet, you will kill the messenger and bring the cup to me."

As an extra measure to assure his compliance, Voldemort had altered Draco's wand, carving curled symbols all over it and hacking off three inches from the end. It would perform only a few rudimentary charms and hexes (including the Kedavra curse). He could no longer conjure or transfigure objects; when he was left on the island, he had only the clothes on his back, his denatured wand and of course, the cup. Months of swimming and foraging, with none of the rich food to which he was accustomed, made Draco lean and muscular. It was little comfort to him, however, that his body was in peak form while he was slowly losing his mind.

*He'll know how much you can tolerate. Hang on to that thought, Draco.* Days turned into weeks, months, and he hung on, but a lifetime? It was impossible. Draco Malfoy had never lived alone. There was always someone, a servant, a house elf, a thug like Crabbe or Goyle, *someone* to entertain him, to keep him from thinking too hard, regretting too much. Lately his own screams had woken him up at night. *You can endure it if you remind yourself that he'll stop before it's too late.* Too late for whom? Perhaps Voldemort would be perfectly satisfied to leave a madman guarding this cup; Draco could still kill if he were insane.

Draco had long since stopped wondering whether this was all a sham, if he'd been creatively banished by the Dark Lord, abandoned to watch over some worthless trinket. He was certain of it now. He hated the fact that he had to drink from it every day. He would have loved to cast it into the sea, even crush it under a rock first, but that would be his death. He could not Apparate off the island, and there was nothing but ocean on every horizon. He scouted constantly for ships, but there were none. He was far outside the trade lanes--and even if he could signal a vessel, he knew the Dark Lord would come for him if he abandoned his post. Voldemort was mocking him, leaving him where he must carry out this inane "duty" or die, using him as an anchor to tether his father into service.

Because of the badger engraved upon the cup, Draco suspected that it had once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. If authentic, it was certainly worth a lot of Galleons, but

hardly so precious as to require a hiding place on the bottom of the world, with a guard standing over it for a lifetime. That was perhaps the most rankling part of all: that Voldemort had never even told him what it was.

This day, there was something on the horizon, and it was not just a bit of debris or a whale's tail. Draco watched it for hours as it drifted slowly to the shore. A boat. A bit of broken mast, with some shredded sail still flapping from the boom. He debated at length with himself, whether it looked as though it would float past the island, whether he would swim out to it, whether he would run to it at once when it landed or wait and see if someone was on board. All of which was moot, for as soon as it floated within two hundred meters of the beach, he leapt from behind the dune and dove into the water, unwilling to risk that it might be carried off by a hidden current at the last minute.

It was so small that Draco thought he might tip it over if he tried to climb in. If there was anything worthwhile inside, he didn't want it to end up at the bottom of the reef. He got behind the boat and kicked his feet to push it to shore, which came up faster than he expected. Realizing he was only in ankle-deep water, he leapt to his feet with his heart pounding in anticipation, yet also dreading that it would be completely empty, a castaway shell like himself...

... he had never been so happy to see a woman's face in his life.

*Strike quickly.* A human being, a woman, she was unconscious, dehydrated... was she dead? No, there was movement, breathing. A flood of relief. *Strike quickly.* His wand was back in his shelter--to kill her right now, he'd have to use his bare hands. There wasn't anything harder than coral or wood on the whole island; it might take hours to beat her to death, and he had no taste for it. He could go back and get his wand, she wasn't going anywhere.

Draco pounded across the hot sand, over the dune, through the scrub grasses, into the trees. His wand was right beside the cup, as always. The cup... he could give her some water. He could immobilize her with the *Petrificus* curse, bind her with the bit of rope in her boat. *Strike quickly.* He hadn't even checked for the Mark, her skin was so dark he might have overlooked it! He grabbed the cup; if this was the Dark Lord's courier, then he *had* to revive her.

He sprinted back to the shore. The woman was right where he'd left her in the bottom of the boat, which had already begun to rock with the waves. The tide was coming in, it could have drifted off! Draco lifted the bow and hauled it far up onto the beach, almost to the dunes. He would have to pull it up further before high tide, but this would do for now.

He put his arm under her back and knees. He had become so strong from swimming and climbing that he could pick her up as easily as a baby. She stirred a bit, turning her head. He took the cup and raised it to her lips, knowing it would be full of water when it touched them. He tipped it carefully, hoping she was alert enough to swallow. Much of it poured down her neck, but she didn't cough or choke; he could do this, he could save her... and maybe she would stay with him.

She was dressed in ragged clothes. He wondered if she got caught in the squall two days before, perhaps when she was out checking traps or nets. After giving her some more water, he got up to check the boat. There were a few floats in it and some rope, the sort of things one might expect on a fisher's boat, at least if one had never seen such a thing before. She had to be poor, with such a battered old rig. Perhaps no one would miss her, maybe no one would even come looking for her, the sea didn't give up its dead, after all. But wait, maybe she was the courier, he still hadn't looked for the Mark.

She was sitting on the edge of the dune, examining the gold cup in one hand, with his wand in the other, along with a spiraled piece of wood that he was certain was her own wand. *Strike quickly.* It had all been an act, the helplessness, the weakness. She tossed the cup in the air and caught it, then held it by the handle as if to show it to him.

"Yeh mastah's not gonna be 'appy with yeh fah this one, my brothah." All this time he'd longed so desperately to hear another voice, and she made Hagrid sound like he'd been to charm school. It was the most beautiful and terrifying thing he'd ever heard.

"I'm dead," he said, and sank to his knees.

She smiled kindly and shook her head. "Not yet, yeh not, but thet's an option. 'Ere's anothah. What say yeh climb in thet boat an' come beck to Dunedin with me, and see if theh's some way arand thet?"

He stared off beyond the dunes, neither speaking nor moving. Why bother? He was dead. He might as well just stay here and wait for it.

She cocked her head and regarded him with concern. "Lad," she said softly, "no Death Eatah Oy've eveh known would've stopped to give me a drink, certainly no' from sech a fine tumbleh." She admired the cup lovingly, smiling at him again. "Per'aps yeh've been servin' the wrong side?"

"It doesn't matter. I've failed him twice now. He'll find me."

"'E will, indeed, my brothah, if yeh give up," she said with a solemn nod. "But Oy found yeh first. An' Oy might just be bettah at 'iding things than 'e is."

He finally looked at her again, though listlessly. "Just get in your boat and go."

"Fair enough, mate, Oy can do thet," she said. "But it pains me teh see a young man die jest as 'e's found some kindness in 'is 'eart."

His gaze intensified. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Nah, but Oy can guess," she said with a shrug. "Yeh must'a thought little o' kindness when yeh got thet Mark put upon yeh throat. An' 'ere Oy've known yeh less than an 'our, an' already seen it."

Draco's spine and abdomen both gave out at the same time, making him crumple like an accordion into the sand. How could she speak to him as though he had any hope? How could he listen, as though it could possibly be true?

"Did they evah tell yeh what this is, my brothah?" she said conversationally, shaking the cup. "An' 'Orcrux. Did'je know thet?" Draco shook his head, not comprehending. "One o' six, actually. They're what's keepin' the one 'oo gave yeh that Mark alive, so teh speak."

For the first time, Draco listened intently.

"Yeah," she continued, "this'll be the fourth we've found. Only got but two more an' *chk*." She flicked his wand in front of her throat with a meaningful look. "Closin' in on 'im, brothah. Might even be worthwhile teh give it a go a bit longah, wha'?"

The best Draco could do was a raspy whisper. "Why are you saying these things to me?"

"Told yeh!" she said warmly. "Can't stand teh see a lovely young man go teh waste. Been plenty of 'em gone to 'is cause, every one of 'em a tragedy. Nothing like bein' left alone on an islan' teh make a man rethink 'is priorities. Oy 'ave teh leave now, take care 'o this cup," she said in a firm voice. "If Oy leave yeh here, yeh'll die, simple as thet. If yeh come with me, yeh may die. An' yeh may 'ave a chance. 'S'up to you, my brothah. Choose quickly."

Draco sat bolt upright. "I'll go."

She nodded and waved at the boat. "Get in front. Oy'm still going to bind yeh."

He picked up the bow and pulled the boat back down to the water, shivering despite the heat as he climbed in. Still keeping her wand pointed warily at him, she set down the cup and his wand and took up a length of rope from the stern. He offered his hands submissively but on impulse, turned one upward and held it out to her. She furrowed her brow, then reached out and shook his hand.

"Draco Malfoy," he said softly.

"Maura Arukangi," she replied. "A pleasure."

Tonks was pounding on his door. Harry had no idea what time it was, but he launched out of bed and flung the door wide. "What?"

"Kitchen, Harry. Now! Major meeting!" She dashed up the stairs to the next room, while Harry grabbed the nearest robe and charged in the opposite direction.

He was still tugging the bathrobe over his nightshirt as he leaped down the last few steps to the basement. "Harry, come here!" said Lupin. Lachlan was leaning against the wall, but upon closer inspection, he was leaning *into* it, his hands vanishing through the stone. A chalk circle surrounded by runes had been drawn there, and the wall within it was rippling as though made of liquid. Lachlan leaned back and pulled, and another pair of arms emerged from the wall, followed quickly by a witch wearing ragged clothes but a victorious smile.

"The cop!" said the witch "Oy 'ave it!" Lachlan picked her up and swung her around joyfully, but Harry hadn't the foggiest idea what she had said. He turned, a bit self-consciously, to Lupin.

"Cup, Harry," said Lupin quietly, but with glee. "She's found Helga Hufflepuffs's cup!"

Lachlan set her on her feet, and as she hoisted the cup high in the air, a cheer rang through the dark kitchen. It passed from hand to hand for a few moments, then someone set it down on the table. As if on cue, the mood sombered; just like the locket, now that they had it, what to do with it? People took seats around the table, studying it with concerned faces as newcomers continued to step out of the Floo and down the stairs.

Lupin glanced anxiously up and down the gathering. "Dumbledore destroyed one of these, at the cost of his hand," he said without preamble. "We now have two of them. They were meant to be spread far and wide, and there may be spells on them to alert Voldemort if they are brought together. Does anyone have any proposals for destroying them?"

"Yeh can't, not yet," said the witch, and though her voice was firm, she looked a bit frightened.

Lachlan stepped behind her. "Everyone, this is my wife, Maura. There's a complication. The one that was guarding it surrendered."

To Harry's amazement, Lupin and several others looked concerned. Harry simply shook his head. "So?" Maura glared at him, clearly wishing that the circumstances would permit a few choice words.

"He *surrendered*, Harry," said Lachlan. "Willingly--without a fight. He betrayed Voldemort, meaning he forfeited his life. We owe him protection."

"Excuse me?" sputtered Harry. "This is a Death Eater we're talking about?"

Lupin set his hand on Harry's arm. "This is a *person*, Harry."

"A person who would kill any one of us, probably already has... why is this even being discussed?" Harry was livid, and several people around the table nodded in agreement.

Lupin's voice boomed through the kitchen. "Because unlike our enemy, we have the capacity for mercy!" He stared down each of the dissenters in turn. "If this is a murderer, we'll see him punished. But he's risked certain death to help us; we can at least hear his story." He faced Harry again, taking firm hold of his forearm. "Whoever he is, he defied Voldemort, which makes him one of *us*."

"E alreadeh is one o' yeh," said Maura. "Terrified Oy'll send 'im beck to yeh, mattah o'fact." The table went completely silent. "Name's Draco Malfoy."

One could have heard a pin drop, but no pin in its right mind would break the silence at a time like this.

Lupin finally spoke. "We know him, Maura. To the best of my knowledge, he's never killed anyone." Harry shot him a withering glance, but Lupin absorbed it without so much as a blink. "Do you disagree?"

Harry bit back his rage before he could speak. "He tried to kill Dumbledore--"

"And backed down," said Lupin, with an almost hostile edge. None of them could hear Harry's response; it formed only in Lupin's mind.

Lupin shuddered, then let go of Harry and turned to the Arukangis. "Bring him here. We'll interrogate him right now."

"Oy don't think so, my brothah," said Maura, jaw set and eyes afire; she looked small and unimposing, but the power in her glowed as strong as Dumbledore's ever had. "Oy accepted 'is surrendah, Oy won't turn 'im ovah fah vengeance." Lachlan nodded from behind his wife. Harry felt his shoulders tighten; he was not going to let Malfoy get away.

Before he could speak, a figure shoved to the front of the crowd and strode to the portal in the wall. It was Ondossi. She stepped through the portal without a word, hitting it so hard that it looked as though the wall would splash.

Lupin scowled momentarily, then shrugged. "It seems we're going to *him*, then."

The sun was brilliant on the other side of the portal; they had traveled to the other side of the world. Ondossi had both hands over her eyes, curled into fists. She herself was curled too, as though she'd been punched in the stomach, but there was no one within ten feet of her. Harry didn't spare her a second glance, though, having spotted Malfoy under a eucalyptus tree, surrounded by a band of wizards with stern faces.

Malfoy looked strange. His skin was deep brown, with a fine white scar meandering unbroken from collarbone to waist--the product of Harry's Septumsempra curse. On his throat, he bore the Dark Mark. He wore only what appeared to be an old shirt tied by the sleeves around his waist. But Harry was struck hardest by the way Malfoy's face held no insolence, no sneer, no challenge.

Harry meant to fix Malfoy's gaze right then, but he was jostled by the Arukangis coming through the portal. Ondossi stood up, rounding on him with her eyes closed. *Wait. This could still be a trap.*

Her words came to his mind, but he spoke his answer. "He *will* answer to me!"

"Yes!" she said aloud as well. "But not yet. I want a crack at him first. His memory may have been altered, Potter, and what you might miss could be invaluable. Don't screw this up."

"Harry, please," said Lupin. He was so earnest, so urgent, that the words found their way through Harry's anger and forced him to compose himself, to push back the bloodlust. Harry glared furiously at Remus, then Tura, then pulled himself roughly from Lupin's grip.

"Fine, then," said Harry in disgust, with a clear unspoken message: he was next in line.

"Lead me to him," said Ondossi, her arms outstretched; she could not open her eyes in the sunlight. Maura glanced at her husband, who nodded. She took Ondossi by the

hand and guided her to Malfoy.

Tura stumbled as she walked blindly. It was bizarre and unsettling to see her so helpless. "Left hand," she said, and Maura beckoned to Malfoy, who looked alarmed, but raised his arm haltingly.

She held his fingers with one hand as she carefully ran the other over his forearm. Puzzled, she asked, "Where's your Mark?"

"Higher," replied Malfoy in a voice so hollow Harry barely recognized it.

Ondossi spread her fingers and moved her hand slowly along his arm until she hit the edge of the Mark, just above his shoulder. She gave a little gasp, running her fingers lightly around its outline, which extended over the entire left side of his throat up to his ear. Malfoy tipped his head back slightly with a sharp intake of breath.

Harry fumed. As if it weren't bad enough that she was practically caressing that traitor, she leaned closer and brought her face right up to the Mark, breathing deep through her mouth as though she meant to kiss him. Harry felt a surge of jealousy, but Ondossi suddenly sprang back from Malfoy and said harshly, "This was meant to kill you. How did you live?"

It took Malfoy a moment to answer. "I said something that amused him. He had time to change his mind."

Ondossi nodded. "It's good that you were honest with me. I am going to do a terrifying thing to you now. The more you fight, the worse you'll feel. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Malfoy, in that same flat voice.

She put out her hand cautiously, almost fearfully, and again Harry found it disconcerting to see her fumbling blindly. Once she touched Malfoy's chest, however, she quickly brought both hands up to his forehead. Instantly his face contorted with fear and he tried to back away. Three of the wizard guards had to brace against him to hold him still, though they looked rather uncomfortable about doing so.

Malfoy made an unearthly sound, beginning as a groan but steadily advancing into a harsh scream, a sound like a pneumatic wrench. Her hands remained on his brow. His knees buckled and he would have fallen to the ground, were it not for the guards holding him in place. Ondossi, by contrast, looked as though she could be sleeping, her eyes closed and her expression serene.

Even Harry began to wish she would hurry up and get it over with. He glanced at Lupin nervously, and saw that he had gone very pale. Lupin met his gaze but, to Harry's surprise, bit his lip and turned away.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that she would need help when she finished with Malfoy. He dashed toward them just as Ondossi pulled her hands away, whereupon she immediately crumpled, doubling over at first from the waist, then the knees. Harry caught her by the hair before she smashed headfirst into the ground, leaving him face to face with the trembling Malfoy. Harry recognized the look on Malfoy's face at once—he had seen it on a number of faces himself. His stomach lurched when he realized that Lupin had turned away from him because the scene reminded him of the times he'd writhed under Harry's penetrating eyes.

"I'm glad you didn't resist," said Ondossi from ground level, her voice filled with calm certitude. Her comment produced a number of dismayed expressions among the group, none of whom wanted to see what would happen under *difficult* conditions. Harry hauled her up awkwardly, pulling her partly by the hair; she was heavy and awkward when she went limp like that. "It would have been less frightening if I could open my eyes," she continued, oblivious to the absurd puppetry her body was enduring. "For that I am sorry."

To Harry's surprise, she recovered her footing almost immediately. Turning with a wobble to face Lupin, Ondossi said, "He has excellent information. Give Potter the opportunity to extract it; it will be educational." Lupin looked uncertain, but he nodded. Despite the fact that her eyes were closed, Ondossi gave a curt nod of her own and took a few shaky steps, but she seemed unsure where to point. "Maura Arukangi," she said, "come here."

The witch glanced about nervously, but did as she was instructed. Ondossi put out her hands, and though Maura looked as though she would rather reach into a bear trap, she took them in her own. "I would share your breath," said Ondossi in a barely audible voice. Harry and Lupin eyed the others incomprehendingly, but Lachlan and the locals seemed to take this right in stride. The two women leaned forward to touch their brows together, then each breathed deep through her nose. Lachlan whispered, "This is a powerful bond among the Maori, even the Muggles do it."

Ondossi stepped back and said, "Know that I will see your promise to him honored."

"Thank yeh, my sistah," said Maura warmly, though she still sounded a bit unnerved.

Ondossi wasn't finished, however; she spun again to face Harry directly. "You have legitimate grievances against him," she said quietly. "However, he is no longer the child you knew. Be careful when you take him." With that, she strode resolutely to the portal, as unhesitatingly as if she could see it, and stepped through.

A collective internal "What was THAT all about?" circulated within the group for a brief moment.

Harry and Lupin each gave a feeble shrug. "She's not always quite so... intense," said Lupin weakly.

"S'alright," said Maura. "We 'ad a Legilimagus once, too." A few of the older wizards nodded thoughtfully. "'E was 'eadmasteh when Oy was at school. Even spookieh 'an 'at one, eh?" More nods, with vigor.

"Well," said Lupin, "are you ready to interrogate Mr. Malfoy?"

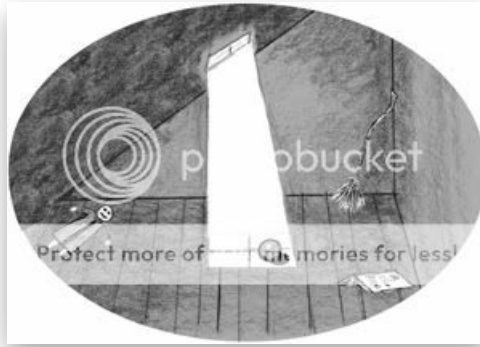
All eyes glanced back and forth between Harry and Draco. Malfoy was standing on his own again, but he was shaking and looked somewhat green. Harry's thoughts flew back to the top of the Astronomy Tower, and he recalled a desperate boy deciding between killing Dumbledore and killing his entire family, including himself.

Harry shook his head. "Once is enough for one day." Turning to Maura, he said, somewhat apologetically, "Please let us take him back to London."

Maura eyed Harry with apprehension. "Oy gave me word to 'ide 'im from 'is Mastah." Her implication was clear: she would not yeild to anyone who wished to kill him out of spite.

"There's no safer place than where we're going," said Harry. Looking deep into Maura's eyes he added to her alone *Tura's word is as good as an Unbreakable Vow. If she thought I would hurt him, she would never have left him to me.*

## 35: Illuminations



Harry woke at dawn bone-tired, but unable to sleep any longer. For a moment he wondered if he'd only dreamed about the discovery of Malfoy and the Horcrux. But there was a certain tension in the air, perhaps borne by the smattering of voices barely filtering up from the kitchen. He dressed and headed for the drawing room, hoping he might catch his godfather before he turned in for the day.

Sirius was there, and so was Tura. For a brief, gut-wrenching moment, he was certain she'd told Sirius everything, but his godfather glanced up at him with a warm smile and beckoned him to join them. Harry shuffled through the door, silently cursing his insomnia. But the worst was yet to come: Sirius gave him a sly wink and led him by the elbow to sit down on the loveseat beside Tura. His stomach lurched; for a moment he was afraid she'd move to another chair.

Sirius glanced between them a few times and a hint of a frown appeared on his brow. "I'm glad you're here, Harry," he said somewhat stiffly. "I was just about to retire. Perhaps you would keep Miss Ondossi company." Harry's heart sank; he could practically see the gears turning in his godfather's head. *I should never have told him I fancy her. He can see something's gone wrong, and he's going to ask about it, and that'll be that--I can't lie to him.* But he was spared for the moment, as Sirius merely leaned over and kissed his cheek, then, startling both of them, bowed to Tura and kissed her hand as well. "Good day to both of you," he said, his face unreadable, and departed.

They sat there silently until long after the bedroom door clicked shut upstairs. Tura finally commented, "You look a little better."

"Mrs. Weasley's been making me eat."

She nodded. "Good for her." After another long pause, she asked, "Will you be coming back to school soon?"

He'd been away for a week, and had recently been looking forward to seeing Ron and Hermione again, but sitting beside her was a wrenching reminder of his reasons for being away. "I suppose that's up to Professor McGonagall," he finally replied, his voice gritty.

She shifted in the seat to face him; her knees brushed against his. "Harry," she said in a surprisingly mild tone, "you've got to get a grip on yourself."

"I can't."

"You can too."

Harry put both his hands in his hair, shaking his head. "No, I *can't*. I miss you, Tura. I miss you *so much*." He hadn't cried in two days, but now tears were threatening again; he pulled the skin on his face taut in an effort to stave them off.

"No, you *can*, Harry," she said. "You're an Occlumens--you can stop all this. You can Occlude it."

That was so unexpected that cynical curiosity outpaced despair for a moment. "So Occlumency's the cure for a broken heart?" he asked tersely.

She nodded. "Sorrow's just a part of your thoughts. Set your magic around it like anything else. It'll get back you eventually, but you can at least deal with it in measured doses."

He stared at her; she was actually being sincere. "Honestly?" he said.

"How do you think I'm handling things, hotshot?" she answered.

He tilted his head appraisingly. "And how are you sleeping?"

She turned away; he'd struck a nerve. "All right, you got me there," she admitted sourly. "My nightmares are waking up Hagrid *and* Fang. But at least I can eat." Pulling her hair behind her ear, she rose and took a few steps toward the hearth. "I'd better be going; class starts in an hour." She halted, though, and turned back around. "The prisoner... are you gonna do him over?" she said.

Harry shrugged. "Of course. That's my next lesson, isn't it?"

Tura nodded, frowning pensively. "Look, Harry," she began, "I know he's been a jerk in the past. A lot of people say and do dumb things when they're growing up. But that's what growing up *is*, Harry. You do stuff that seems right at the time, but later you realize that it wasn't a good idea at all. And not just major events--I'm talking little, everyday things like being mean to other kids just because your parents taught you not to like them.

"Draco Malfoy spent his whole life in the Pureblood/Slytherin 'snobility' and he's finally caught on that it's not what he really wants. That's pretty incredible, you know, Harry. Some people *never* figure out that they have options besides 'the way we've always done it.' They just go on doing whatever worked in their family, their little corner of the world, never taking a look at the greater picture."

She suddenly averted her gaze, as if embarrassed. "His mind is intact; see what you can learn about Lord Voldemort's location. Just try not to hurt him, okay?"

As she stepped into the Floo, he felt a sickening burst of insight. *She fancies him.* Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall forward. *Of course she does; the Wild Child of the Tundra meets the Ragged Man of the South Seas. He's just her type, with nothing to his name but a threadbare shirt.* True, she'd been in his mind, but she probably couldn't even comprehend how wealthy Malfoy had once been. *I wonder what HE would do if he knew she was Slytherin's heir.* Harry thought spitefully, then winced with shame.



He stared a long time at the embers, resentful and jealous, yet completely aware that there was nothing he could do about it. "I miss you, Tura," he whispered, then grit his teeth and climbing the many flights of stairs to Lady Black's former bedroom.

He reversed the spell on the door and pushed it open, then wished he'd knocked. Malfoy looked very unsettled by the sudden intrusion and it occurred to Harry that every time the floorboards creaked, he probably wondered if his executioner approached. Malfoy certainly hadn't recovered his typical swaggering confidence overnight, and he looked almost happy to see Harry, although he immediately lowered his gaze to the floor.

"Malfoy." Harry kept his voice cool and neutral.

"Potter."

Harry closed the door and sealed it with a nonverbal charm. He stood before this strange caricature of the Draco Malfoy he'd known and wasn't quite sure what to say. The old Malfoy would have insulted or threatened him by now, but this one just sat there looking worn and tired.

"So who's that girl?" Malfoy finally asked after a long silence.

"Her name's Ondossi. She's a Legilimagus. Do you know what that is?"

Malfoy's brow furrowed slightly. "Not really, but judging by the way she ripped open my head, I think I have a good guess."

"I'm one too," said Harry.

"Yeah? Since when?" There might have been a hint of derision, but it sounded more like curiosity.

"About six months. I'm still learning."

Malfoy nodded in appraisal of this news. "Ah. So you'll be practicing on me."

"Yes," said Harry, though it sounded hard-hearted, even to himself.

Malfoy shuddered and briefly curled around his middle protectively, but he quickly resumed his prior posture. "All right, then," he said quietly, his expression neither more nor less despondent than before.

"Is this an act, Malfoy?" Harry would know the answer soon enough, but this was all so eerie, he wanted to talk first, to find out what had happened to that mind before he went leaping into it.

"An act?" Malfoy's eyes lost their focus on the bedroom rug as he pondered the question. "No. No acting. I don't think I've ever been more real than you see right now, Potter. I'm the living dead, but I'm real."

"What did he *do* to you?" Harry asked in a strained whisper.

Malfoy reached up and touched the edge of his Mark. "You heard it yesterday. He slit my throat--that's why the Mark is up here. With his teeth, you know. But before I died, he thought of a use for me. So I lived."

Harry knew Voldemort generally let others carry out the mundane task of punishing wayward Death Eaters. "But why would *he* kill *you*?" he asked, before realizing how oddly denigrating that sounded.

Unruffled, Malfoy took a deep breath, pulling the blanket more tightly around his shoulders. "I failed him personally. He made me betray Dumbledore. I was supposed to kill him. Kill Dumbledore, that is, in exchange for my father's life." Malfoy smiled bitterly. "What I didn't know at the time was that he never planned kill my dad. It was all just a game--he was using me to punish Dad for failing to get that prophecy. As if Azkaban weren't enough." Malfoy's voice was rising, but he paused and composed himself.

"The Dark Lord knew all along that I couldn't kill Dumbledore," Malfoy presently continued. "He set everything up, so he would have an excuse to slaughter me right before my father's eyes, and Dad would still have to be loyal because it was all within *the rules*." A strain of Malfoy's old, familiar contempt rang through the last words.

"But he changed his mind. I asked him, *very politely*, if I could live. Although that probably had nothing to do with it," Malfoy conjectured in an offhanded tone. "I think he simply remembered he needed a slave to guard that cup."

"So he banished you instead," said Harry.

Malfoy nodded. "Almost nine months. It was supposed to be a lifetime. At least it was warm." He tugged at the blanket again.

Harry noticed for the first time that Malfoy was shivering. He pulled off his cloak and tossed it at Malfoy's feet. The other wizard immediately picked it up and pulled it around himself, and to Harry's complete surprise, said, "Thank you."

"There was a time when you would have thrown it back at me, no matter how cold you were," noted Harry quietly.

For the first time since Harry had entered the room, Malfoy looked up at him. Harry gasped out loud; Malfoy's eyes were brimming with tears.

"Yeah, that's right," said Malfoy. "You know, I used to think the whole world was already all mine, all I had to do was step up and claim it. But now I understand. I'm unspeakably lucky to have even this little cloak." He buttoned it under his chin and pulled the hood up over his head, bowing his head to obscure his face completely.

Teardrops began to dot the blanket in Malfoy's lap. Harry had no idea what to do, but standing there and watching this spectacle seemed unbearably wrong. "Look," he finally mumbled, "I'm going to go find you some warm clothes. I'll be back." He nearly admonished Malfoy to wait there for him, but Malfoy could hardly do anything else.

Harry nearly tripped coming down the stairs, lost in thought about this strange transformation since his last encounter with Malfoy. He stopped on the third floor landing and knocked lightly on his godfather's bedroom door. When there was no answer, he suspected that Sirius was already asleep, so he let himself in as quietly as he could.

Sirius was curled up under the blankets, but he stirred as Harry tried, unsuccessfully, to open the armoire silently. A tousled head poked up from the pillows and frowned groggily at Harry. "S'up?" Sirius asked.

Harry began rifling through the drawers in the armoire. "Sorry I woke you. I'm trying to find some clothes for, uh, the prisoner."

The head plopped back silently into the pillows and disappeared. "Mm-hmm," yawned Sirius. "Maybe some of Reg's old things... Try the boxes underneath." There was a brief bustle as Sirius re-cocooned himself in the blankets and dropped back off to sleep.

Harry pulled a large, flat box from beneath the armoire and found some handsome (if a bit dated) sweaters and shirts, but could not find any trousers except for some flannel pajamas. *Well, it's not as though we're appearing at a formal hearing*, he thought, grabbing a pair of Sirius's socks and slipping quietly back out to the staircase.

Malfoy hadn't moved since Harry's departure, although he had stopped shivering. "Here," Harry said, awkwardly laying the clothes on the floor. "There wasn't a lot to pick from, but these ought to do."

Malfoy nodded, picking up the sweater gingerly, then immediately pulled it on. "It's nice," he said distantly, looking at the colorful pattern knitted around the cuffs. "It makes me think of fish. I used to float on my belly with a Bubble Head Charm and watch the fish swim around for hours and hours. They were so colorful." Malfoy abruptly fell silent and began pulling on the socks.

Harry had never been to a coral reef, but he could see the one in Malfoy's mind without even trying. Malfoy was not exaggerating about the hours he'd spent watching fish swim; his mind was saturated with them, the only distraction he could find on the atoll that had been his prison. Comparing them to the sweater understated their true brilliance; they were beautiful animals, every color imaginable, iridescent, in complex patterns no knitter could ever hope to duplicate. Harry could see them as clearly as if he were treading water in a tropical lagoon.

Harry suddenly felt a bitter pang of guilt; the room in which they'd imprisoned Malfoy was as drab as a dungeon. He had been left shivering without clothes or an adequate blanket. That Voldemort had imprisoned Malfoy in a place with at least some color and distraction when the Order had not irked Harry deeply. Sirius, too, had once been confined within these walls.

"Answer me honestly, Malfoy," said Harry impulsively. "If I take you out of this room for a while, will you try to get away?"

Malfoy looked up, his brows furrowed warily. "Why would you let me out?"

Harry waved his hands impatiently. "Just answer me."

Malfoy looked rather flummoxed for a moment, then replied, "No. What good would it do to run? The minute I left this building, I'd be hunted down." He reflected for a moment. "By both sides," he added bitterly.

Without warning, Harry sent his magic through the other's mind just enough to ascertain that Malfoy was telling the truth.

Malfoy's eyes widened in both fear and awe. "Merlin's beard, you *are* just like her."

Caught up in the inevitable moment of numbness that followed that depth of Legilimency, Harry tipped his head thoughtfully and remarked, "Spooky, isn't it?" He stood up and began unlocking and disenchanting the door before he'd completely recovered, but it didn't matter; Malfoy really wasn't going anywhere.

Harry held out a willing hand, but the other man stood up on his own. Harry wondered idly whether that was done out of dignity, or distrust, or if Malfoy had just forgotten what it was like to have other human beings around to give him a hand up. Harry stepped onto the landing and left the door wide open behind him, but Malfoy didn't follow. He just stood in the doorway, shivering again despite the warm clothes.

Harry beckoned to Malfoy. "It's all right. I'm not trying to trick you. You can come out for a little while."

Malfoy didn't move, eyeing him dubiously. "Why are you doing all this, Potter? You hate me. You've hated me since the day we met."

Harry had to pause a moment to consider his reply. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I know you can't run," he began. "I know you signed your own death sentence when you turned over that cup to Maura Arukangi. I know what Tu-Ondossi did to you, and I have to do it too, because I have to learn all I can before I go up against Vol... your old boss." Malfoy winced; his Mark darkened at the very hint of the name. "I guess there's no need to be harsh with you, except for my own vengeance, or hatred, or whatever you want to call it."

Harry paused thoughtfully again, then continued. "I knew already about Dumbledore. I was there that night, on the Astronomy tower. Dumbledore Petrified me and hid me under my own Invisibility Cloak so I wouldn't be harmed when you and your group came up to finish him off." Malfoy's jaw fell. "I watched it all happen but I couldn't move. I heard what you said. I saw that you couldn't do it, that even though you were in fear for your whole family, you couldn't kill him."

"It's true, I used to hate you. But you've changed, I've changed. Maybe we've done all the hating we need to do. I know I've had my fill of it."

Malfoy slowly nodded and came into the doorway, but not through it. They regarded one another. Malfoy tentatively extended his hand, as though reaching for something very sharp and delicate. Harry took hold and shook it firmly. He had refused Malfoy's first offer to shake his hand nearly seven years earlier.

As he tugged the other wizard onto the landing, Harry began to ponder where they might go. He'd originally reckoned they would go to the drawing room, but he now reflected that they would almost certainly be interrupted. Though he knew it was irrational, Harry didn't like the idea of Phineas Nigellus Black watching him perform Legilimency, but he still had no idea which of the bedrooms in Headquarters were routinely occupied. He'd begun to wish he'd planned things a little better before bringing Malfoy out of confinement when Malfoy spoke.

"Hold on, I know this place. This is the Black house, isn't it?" He stepped back, suspicion and fear plain in his eyes. "What's the game then, Potter? Are you Dark, now?"

Harry blinked a moment. "No, no. How did you..." He stopped, remembering that "Draco Malfoy" was on the family tapestry in the drawing room, right under "Narcissa Black." "Of course," Harry murmured. "Of course you've been here, you're part of the clan." He smirked. "It's a little different from what you remember. This is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix now."

Malfoy's eyes grew wide and round, then he snorted. "You're having me on, aren't you? This is one of the Darkest houses in London! How'd you even get past the serpent on the front door?"

Harry smirked. "Long story, Malfoy. Let's just say Sirius Black was never quite what people thought."

Malfoy nodded cautiously. "I've heard. I didn't believe it all--from what little I know of Peter Pettigrew, he didn't sound smart enough to set up and frame a Black." Harry suppressed a sneer; this sounded more like the arrogant, proud Draco Malfoy he knew so well, though in all honesty, Harry didn't quite understand how Wormtail managed to best Sirius, either.

Malfoy turned away from the stairs, furrowing his brow a moment, then pressed on some of the carvings in the mahogany paneling on the far wall of the landing. Nothing happened, and Harry nearly asked him what he was up to, but then Malfoy straightened up and began anew, adding a few more points to the series. A dragon's carved tail sprung away from the wall and Malfoy twisted it triumphantly. The paneling swung inward, revealing a dark crawlspace that ended in a surprisingly bright alcove. His face lit up and he tipped his head at the portal.

"My aunt made this room! She built it for her cousin Regulus during her seventh year at Hogwarts. Part of a Charms assignment or something. She made him his own playroom, where he could get away from his big brother. When we came here for Aunt Walburga's funeral, I was only about five or six, and the big kids were... well, they were picking on me. Anyway, Aunt Bella brought me up here and showed me how to get in. She said that Aunt Wallie was the only other person who ever knew about it, so it could be my secret place now." He gazed wistfully into the sunlit patch of floor beyond the tunnel.

Harry needed a moment to wrap his head around all he'd just heard. *Aunt Wallie?* It seemed fundamentally wrong that the screeching old hag in the portrait downstairs was ever anyone's "Aunt Wallie." He didn't even want to contemplate Bellatrix Lestrange building a playroom for her cousin--for Sirius's little brother, whose sweater Malfoy was now wearing. That she had once had the capacity to take pity on her nephew Draco, pulling him away from bullies and giving him this little sanctuary, was unthinkable.

Malfoy reached for the dragon's tail again and began to pull the paneling back into place, but Harry held up his hand to stop him. "How do you get out?" he asked.

"It's not warded or anything," Malfoy shrugged. "There's a rope handle on the inside to pull it open. It's only tricky to get in, not out."

Harry jerked his head toward the entrance. "You go first." Malfoy's face lit up with more warmth than Harry had ever seen it bear.

"Merlin's beard, it used to seem a lot bigger," Malfoy grunted as he crawled through the tunnel. When he stood up inside the alcove, Harry followed him, quickly checking the back of the panel to confirm the presence of the handle. The rope looked strong, though the knot on the end was darkened, undoubtedly from years of being tugged by little grubby fingers. Harry swung the panel into place, noting that it didn't even click, then gave the rope a quick pull; the panel opened silently, without any resistance.

Dust swirled in the sunbeam as the two wizards stirred it for the first time in years. "We didn't visit the Blacks very often, especially after Aunt Wallie's funeral," said Malfoy. He suddenly spotted something in a corner and picked it up with a broad smile. "No way!" He turned back to Harry with a model broomstick cradled in his palm. "I always wondered where this went! I got it in Paris when I was seven, at *Le Placard à Balais*. Mum had bought so many campy tourist souvenirs, but I begged her to get me something cool."

He showed Harry the tiny writing on the handle. "This was a classic--the '39 Ratisseur. I wanted a real one ever since I learned how to fly, but you can't even find them in a museum anymore. They used some kind of grass in with the twigs, to give it this slick handling, but it didn't hold up like wood. You rode a Ratisseur until it fell apart and that was it. I always dreamed I'd find one in some old witch's garden shed, left out there and forgotten... heh, me and everybody else, I'm sure." He smirked wistfully, but as he looked up at Harry, the brief burst of animation drained away.

Malfoy let the toy broomstick fall to the floor and closed his eyes, lifting his face toward the glass panel in the slanting ceiling. When a cloud passed before the sun, the last traces of his smile faded. "Are you ready to practice now?"

Harry flattened his lips. "Yes."

Malfoy nodded and sat on the floor, toroids of dust billowing around him. "It's okay, Potter," he said in a flat voice. "Do what you need to do."

Harry sat across from Malfoy, his stomach churning for the second time that day. He felt like some sort of monster attacking its helpless prey. "You know, this would be a lot easier if you were still the same prat you used to be."

"Oh, I am," said Malfoy. "I'm just out of practice." He attempted a wry grin, but it did not mask his dread. They eyed each other cautiously for a moment, then Malfoy sighed. "Look. I've faced him. He's... he's very powerful. If this will help you to fight him... I'm willing, Harry." His voice dropped to a whisper as Harry sat bolt upright; Malfoy had never addressed him by name before. "Listen to me: do whatever it takes. I don't care if you kill me, if it will help to make you stronger--it's worth it. You can't let him beat you, Harry. You *can't*."

Harry grabbed two fistfuls of Malfoy's shirt and yanked the grey eyes up to meet his own, slamming into him with Legilimency to silence his plea.

Draco hated being fitted. He always felt uncomfortably exposed, standing atop a narrow stepstool with some unknown person pinning and pulling at his clothing. He'd been forced to endure this annoying ritual more times than he could count, for Mum insisted that he wear the most tailored wizard robes. She whined endlessly about the "urban casual" look of the required uniform at Hogwarts, but it filled him with quiet glee. Mum had treated him like some sort of dress-up doll for far too long, and he couldn't wait to take control of his daily wardrobe.

At least Mum hadn't insisted on staying in the shop with him. If there was anything worse than standing around for a fitting, it was standing around for a fitting with your mother hovering about and making embarrassing comments about you to anyone who would listen. Draco was bored, and he felt rankled that Madam Malkin assigned an underling to tailor his robes, rather than do it herself. Mum certainly spent enough money in this shop to deserve the finest service! She said this other witch did a better job of fitting young people, but the shopkeeper really ought to be a master of all aspects of her trade. Draco sighed with a noisy huff. At least this one didn't poke him with her pins.

The imp at the front door cooed, "Customer!" just as the knob began to turn, and Madam Malkin trotted out of view to greet the newcomer. She brought another boy to the back of the shop. He, too, seemed to be here without his parents, and what's more, he was hauling around a Gringott's bag that was obviously crammed full of money. Draco would have given anything for an afternoon on Diagon Alley unencumbered by authority, with a sack of cool Galleons to spend on anything he wanted. True, it was a bit gauche to show off one's wealth so blatantly, but Draco still wondered who this boy was, and why he'd never met him before.

What impressed Draco the most were the boy's *clothes*. One of Draco's friends had an older brother with a hidden stash of Muggle magazines. The two boys had spent many a rainy hour perusing them within their secret clubhouse while discussing elaborate plans to run away and join the Muggle world. They would blend in with the locals, quietly acquiring power and wealth with subtle magic, then return triumphantly to the Wizard world and head straight to the currency exchange window at Gringotts. They had carefully studied Muggle customs, just in case that golden opportunity arose.

This kid was wearing one hundred percent Muggle gear--and not the strained, mismatched suits that his parents' friends in the Ministry sometimes wore. No, this was the *authentic* Grunge look, with a little bit of oversized Gangster thrown in. Mum and Dad would drop dead AND come back to haunt him if *he* ever wore clothes like that! Draco permitted himself one tiny envious sneer while Madam Malkin stuffed the kid into a fitting robe.

"Hello. Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said the stranger, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. Draco gazed at the floor, feeling uncomfortably foolish.

"My father's next door buying my books, and mother's up the street looking at wands." *You're not the only one who gets to shop on his own, you know.* Then I'm going to drag them up the street to look at racing brooms." *Kicking and screaming, no doubt.* "I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully Father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

The stranger didn't even answer. This kid didn't just look at Muggle magazines and pretend to go into their territory, he'd obviously *done* it. Draco suddenly felt very childish, making up stories about broomstick piracy. "Have *you* got your own broom?" he asked, hoping to steer the conversation to something more neutral.

"No."

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No."

*What's with this guy? Quidditch is cool... isn't it?* Draco wasn't accustomed to self-doubt, and it had been coming on all too frequently over the past few months. His mother was practically smothering him with gushy reassurances that he would make lots of nice friends at Hogwarts, to the point that he was starting to wonder if he'd ever speak to another living being again once he enrolled. "I do--Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my House." *So there!*

Though the stranger didn't seem interested in conversation, Draco's curiosity had been piqued, so he kept talking. The kid was beyond cool, though; he was downright icy. He wouldn't talk Quidditch, he wouldn't talk about Houses, then it turned out that he'd been escorted to Diagon Alley by somebody from Hogwarts! The initial delicate patter of jealousy had expanded into an Elephant of Envy, and it was stomping on Draco's chest. *He must already be living up there--no wonder he wouldn't talk about Houses! He probably already moved into his dormitory--shoot, he probably has his very own suite or something!* Draco spent his lifetime immersed in the culture of wealth and one-upmanship, and he had never felt so thoroughly quashed.

Draco deliberately mentioned something his father had once told him about Hagrid, the kid's chaperone, just to knock him down a peg or two, but that flopped too. "I think he's brilliant!" the kid replied right off the cuff.

It was unthinkable that someone this worldly and wealthy could genuinely *like* hanging out with half-breed giants. This kid was having him on as though he, a *Malfoy*, were some kind of buck-toothed bumpkin like his Weasley cousins. Draco seethed with resentment. "Do you? Why is he with you? Where are your parents?" *Are they so sick of*

*you that they shipped you off to boarding school early, then?*

"They're dead."

*As if! Well, it could be true.* A huge inheritance would explain both the bag of Galleons and the freedom to spend it on Muggle clothes. But Draco knew better--that kind of cash didn't come without strings. There would be executors, and provisions to make sure he didn't blow the family fortune, or let it slip into the coffers of greedy relatives or the Ministry. That stuck-up snob was handing him yet another bill of goods, just to see if he'd fall for this one as well. *What a prat!* But Draco also knew how to play games. "Oh, sorry. But they were *our* kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

Draco nearly sputtered. *You're suggesting I'm not a pureblood?!* If it weren't for the fact that he was bound entirely in pins, he might have decked the kid, despite the fact that he had been the first to play the bloodline card. *Just who do you think you are, anyway?* The Malfoys were one of the wealthiest, purest families in Britain. Whoever this kid was, he was definitely no better than a Malfoy; how dare he act as though he were above Draco on the pecking order?

*Say, he doesn't know who I am!* With that sudden insight, everything made sense. The stranger couldn't possibly tell that he, too, was "upper crust," not in these ridiculous oversized fitting robes! Obviously, the other boy had mistaken him for a lesser sort and was treating him accordingly. *Why, if I hadn't noticed his Gringotts bag, I probably would have assumed the same thing about him!* Draco almost sighed in relief; this was just a silly case of mistaken identity. They would undoubtedly have a good laugh about it later.

In fact, now that he recognized the stranger's error, he felt like having a bit of fun with it himself! Could he keep up the ruse long enough to invite the boy "back home" next weekend for dinner? Draco pictured the stranger squirming in dreadful anticipation of "bubble-and-squeak," served in the free "Quidditch Legends" bowls that came with a full-service tuneup on your broomstick. His eyes would probably fly out of their sockets when he found himself walking up the entryway to Malfoy Manor!

It was a funny notion, but Draco knew there was no way he could keep his identity a secret once they got to Hogwarts. Besides, the stranger hadn't shown much of a sense of humor; he'd probably get all bent out of shape rather than find it funny. No, etiquette demanded that Draco graciously overlook this *faux pas*, and tactfully make the stranger aware of his error without embarrassing him further. *I just need a neutral topic that will clue him in to my social standing.* "I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same; they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get their letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

Before the boy could answer, Madam Malkin announced that his fitting was complete. Draco rolled his eyes; the conversation had finally taken a turn for the better and the silly cow had to go and interrupt. Madam Malkin, however, frowned at Draco in reprimand as she pulled the fitting robe over the boy's head. Draco suddenly realized that he had asked for the boy's name before offering his own. *Oops. Bad manners.* To his great relief, Madam Malkin smiled at his recognition of the mistake and gave him a quick wink; he knew she wouldn't tell Mum about his indiscretion.

As the boy took his leave, Draco felt a sudden rush of pride; he had kept his cool, sussed out the situation, and acted (for the most part) like a proper nobleman. Father would be pleased with him.

Harry leaned against the wall of the secret playroom. Despite the numbness closing over him, he wanted to speak. Malfoy shrank back involuntarily, but steeled himself. "You're not finished, are you?" he asked.

"No," said Harry. "Just... never knew."

Malfoy glanced at the floor, then nodded. "Yeah. Well. Now you do."

Harry let his hands fall to the floor beside him. *I'm sorry, Draco*, he projected, effortlessly re-opening Malfoy's thoughts. *I must take all your secrets.*

Moonbeams. It took a while for Harry to register what he was seeing. His head ached, filled with memories that were not his own. He'd spent hours buried within Draco's mind, and even longer in the stupor that followed. Even now, he was too numb to move or speak, but at least he could see the external world again, and recall that it existed.

The sun must have just set, he reasoned, as there were traces of red and purple in the clouds beyond the window. He had revisited Draco's every encounter with Voldemort with painstaking care, searching for any clues of his location, his plans, his weaknesses. For all Draco's prior braggadocio about the Death Eaters and Voldemort, there were actually very few such meetings.

Draco had gone with his father to gatherings at a crumbling country estate a few times, lurking in the background and trying desperately not to be noticed. Harry reckoned these took place in the old Riddle mansion in Little Hangleton, but it was too dark to see any landmarks. Little of importance was said or done at such meetings; they seemed to serve mainly as opportunities for Voldemort to show off before his Death Eaters. A few Crucios here and there, a round of oaths and/or flattery from the troops, and then the Malfoys would depart, Apparating from the front parlor without even a glimpse of the outdoors. Draco would wake up slick with sweat for the next few nights, wondering why they bothered with such rituals when it was clear that any *real* business transpired elsewhere.

Voldemort had come to Malfoy Manor during the summer between their fifth and sixth year at Hogwarts. He sent Narcissa away with no more than a brushing gesture, as though she were a pesky fly. He then told Draco on no uncertain terms that he *would* penetrate the defenses at Hogwarts and murder Albus Dumbledore before another year passed.

"I am gravely disappointed in your father, Draco," Voldemort had explained, relaxing in Lucius's favorite chair by the white marble fireplace. "He has sullied the Malfoy name with his absurd failure at the Ministry. His actions were so inept, I almost wonder if they were deliberate." His red eyes had bored into Draco with the abrupt, cold touch of Legilimency, but he found no confirmation of his theory. Voldemort scoffed. "I suppose I shall not know until I deliver him from Azkaban. Lucius would not confide such treason to anyone, least of all you."

Voldemort leaned forward, which had terrified Draco, but he'd merely picked up his teacup, studying its gilded rim after he drank. "This task is yours alone, Draco. Speak of it to no one. But I do not mean for you to act singlehandedly," he added almost kindly. "You will undoubtedly need devices, books, potions, et cetera, to enact your plan. Severus can help you attain such things, as long as you do not tell him your true purpose. I also recommend Borgin and Burkes, on Knockturn Alley; they have quite a reputation for quality merchandise *and* discretion."

Voldemort stood. "No need to show me out, child; I'm quite sure I know the way." He patted Draco's shoulder and left the parlor, but paused in the doorway. "If you succeed, Draco," he said quietly, "you will earn not only your Mark, but a place of honor at my side. If you fail, however, I will have no more use for the Malfoys. Do you understand?"

Draco automatically said, "Yes, my lord." Any other response was unthinkable.

"I'm not certain you do," said Voldemort, returning to the parlor and taking Draco's hand. He pushed back the cuff of Draco's left sleeve, exposing the pale skin of his forearm. His voice lost its former veneer of politeness. "Your father *failed* me, Draco. Were he not beyond my reach in Azkaban, he would have died that very night. You will make up for his shortcomings, or you will die--you and your mother, and Lucius, at my first opportunity." He ran his fingertips lightly over Draco's arm. They left burning welts everywhere they touched, but Draco knew better than to flinch, or make the slightest sound. "That would be a terrible shame. I would much prefer to Mark you as my own, young man."

With that, Voldemort had departed. Draco remained frozen in his chair for a long time, shivering and sobbing, wishing he had the courage to cut off his own arm at the elbow.

Harry could almost pity Draco, but he was still too numb. There was something jiggling his head. He blinked at the moonbeams and heard Draco's voice. "Harry? Are you awake?"

He couldn't answer yet.

The room grew darker, the moonlight more distinct. Harry finally turned his head back to the center, surprised to find that he was looking up into Draco's face. He realized his head was resting in Draco's lap; the other wizard was jostling him by bouncing his legs and feet.

"Hey," said Draco when they made eye contact.

"Could you stop that?" Harry rasped.

The jiggling stopped. "You're awake now? For sure?" Harry nodded. "Good." Draco promptly punched him, hard, on the shoulder. "That's for scaring me half to death, you tosser! I was sure I'd have to go out there and explain to everyone that you'd let me loose, hidden with me in the secret room, and promptly *died* on me! Great Mother of Merlin, Potter, did you know you would stop breathing?"

Harry managed a shrug. "Been told. Not like I can see it."

Draco rolled his eyes, looking as though he wanted to slug Harry again. "That figures. Stupid Gryffindork!" he muttered.

Harry grinned.

Soon afterward, he felt clear enough to get up. He was just beginning to notice a vague sense of hunger, which probably meant that he was starving. Harry sat up slowly and gave his head a quick shake. "You okay?" he asked Draco.

"Been better. Are you going to lock me back up?"

"No." Harry had seen firsthand that Draco had no intent to flee. "Let's go down to the kitchen, then I'll find Reem and explain things." He crawled into the little entry tunnel and pulled on the rope.

Draco followed, but halted abruptly on the stairs. "Reem... Do you mean Remus Lupin?"

Harry turned, raising his brow. "That's right. He's the leader here. Of the Order of the Phoenix," he added.

Draco's eyes widened. "Lupin's a werewolf."

Harry opened his mouth for an angry retort, when several things came to him at once. There were no lights on the stairs, not even on the lowest floors. There was always a candle or two in the wall sconces after dark. The house was unusually quiet. Even though people tried not to disturb the portraits in the main hall, a bit of conversation or the crackling of a fire would inevitably drift along the staircase. It was dinner time; at the very least, there should be sounds of cutlery coming up from the kitchen.

Harry knew it was time for dinner, because he'd watched the rise of the evening moon through the window in the playroom.

The *full* moon.

## 36: Wolf's Bane

*Chapter 36 of 50*

Desperate times and desperate measures.



The two wizards froze on the stairs, not daring to breathe. Both focused completely on their hearing, craning desperately for any sound of movement within the mansion. All was still, or so it seemed; the noises from the street seemed outrageously loud, more than capable of covering up the delicate padding of stealthy feet.

Harry moistened his lips without thinking, wincing at the tiny click made when he opened his mouth. They had just been *talking*, for Merlin's sake; there was no need to get all worked up over that little sound. But his mind was in overdrive, eager to seize hold of anything concrete that would free him from thinking about the werewolf lurking somewhere in the dark silence.

He couldn't stop the rapid rate of his breath, but he forced himself to keep it shallow and quiet. He stretched his hand behind him, hoping Malfoy could see it in the dark stair--the last thing he wanted to do was bump him unexpectedly and startle him into jumping, or yelling, or both. A few seconds later, the other wizard took his hand, and Harry could project to him through that link. *Can you hear anything?* Harry waited for a response, then clenched his jaw in frustration; naturally Draco couldn't answer with his mind like Tura could. *Squeeze my hand, once for yes, twice for no.*

Cold fingers clamped down on his own, much harder than necessary, two times.

*Me either. But he's here. It's the only explanation why it's so quiet.*

One squeeze.

Where could they go? Harry knew some locking spells and wards, but unfortunately all of them worked only as long as the door itself held together. He doubted that the door to the little playroom was strong enough to withstand an onslaught from a ravenous wolf. Lady Black's bedroom door might; after all, Buckbeak had never managed to escape from that room. Of course, Buckbeak was trapped inside, on the same side as the hinges--he needed to pull the door inwards to get past it, which required a bit of dexterity. A werewolf, bashing against the door from the outside, would have a distinct advantage.

Harry thought again about the playroom and the little crawlspace at its entry. It was possible Lupin wouldn't even fit through the tunnel, and if he did, he'd be confined to a small area. A few painful hexes right in the face might deter him for a while. It would certainly be easier to strike at him while he was wriggling through the tunnel than if he smashed down the bedroom door and bounded into the room.

*Back up. We'll hide in the playroom.*

Malfoy rapidly squeezed his hand twice.

Harry clenched his own fingers and gave him a little shove backwards. *Move it! Our best bet is to hold him off in the tunnel.*

Malfoy gave him another pair of squeezes, then another and another. Harry really wasn't in the mood for it, but there wasn't much he could do. Without eye contact, he couldn't skim the other wizard's thoughts, and he couldn't risk even thirty seconds of numbness in order to do real Legilimency. *We don't have time for this!* Harry projected. *You'd better have a bloody good reason!*

Malfoy went motionless, then gripped his hand with a single firm squeeze. In lieu of a noisy huff, Harry pressed his teeth together as tightly as he could.

Back to the drawing board. If they couldn't go back up, they had to go forward. The fireplaces in the drawing room and the kitchen were both on the Floo Network, but both were several flights of stairs away. Harry knew that some upper floor rooms had little balconies with French doors; he'd noticed them from the outside. If they could find such a room, they could climb down or even jump if they had to. That seemed like the best plan, but just as Harry got ready to convey it to Malfoy, he realized the flaw. The windows would undoubtedly be warded shut to keep Lupin inside.

*If you're thinking about going out a window, I have a feeling they're locked up.*

A pause, then a single squeeze.

*Think we should try one anyway?*

Another pause, but before Malfoy replied, both of them froze as the distant clacking of claws on wood indicated that an animal had just mounted the stairs.

"This way!" hissed Malfoy, darting past Harry, still clutching his hand like a lifeline. Harry jerked along after him, his legs unwilling to propel himself closer to the werewolf, but he had no better option. Malfoy hit the fourth floor landing and darted down the short hall on the left, flinging open the door to a small conservatory and yanking Harry inside. "Lock it!" he cried as he slammed the door.

Harry already had his wand in hand. "*Clausura!*" he shouted, then immediately sought the biggest, heaviest object in the room to move in front of the door. "*Mobili--*" he began, stopping in mid-spell. He swore, then looked at Malfoy. "What's Latin for 'piano'?"

Malfoy's jaw fell open. The two wizards stared at one another, panting, as the cautious clicking on the stairs transformed into a thudding gallop. There was no doubt they'd been discovered. "I don't know; I think Latin was invented *before* pianos! Forget it!" roared Malfoy. "Use the armoire instead!"

Harry pointed at the large cabinet. "*Mobiliarmarium!*" he cried, flicking his wand toward the doorway. The cabinet slid across the hardwood floor with a groan and a noxious scraping sound, but not a moment too soon; it had barely settled into place when a tremendous crash shook the door.

Both of them remained still another moment, awestruck by the sheer power behind the blow. Malfoy smiled wanly. "Good show! I'm glad you knew that one."

"I didn't. Faked it," said Harry, shrugging. His knees suddenly felt like rubber.

Malfoy gaped. "In that case, I'm glad I said 'armoire' and not 'dresser'."

At that point, the wolf began to growl, scratching viciously at the door. Both wizards snapped out of their momentary relief and turned as one to the wide French windows. "*Alohomora!*" said Harry with a flick of his wand, not really expecting them to open, but crossing his fingers anyway.

Malfoy reached the gilt handles first and gave them a mighty tug, but they didn't even turn. "Try *Dissero*." Harry pointed his wand and said the word. "Merlin's wand, Potter, you never learned that?" said Malfoy impatiently. "Oh, let me!" He snatched the wand from Harry's hand and cast the spell with a graceful unfurling of his wrist. The doors clattered but remained closed.

"*Patefacio!*" said Malfoy with a slicing gesture. "*Insectus! Disruptus! Adflictavi!*" He swung Harry's wand as though he was conducting an orchestra, but the doors remained stubbornly closed. "Who in seven hells charmed these shut?" he finally panted, eyes wide in disbelief.

"Probably Mad-Eye Moody," Harry groaned.

Malfoy dropped his wand arm in defeat. "We're doomed."

A yip followed by a particularly nasty snarl issued from the hallway; apparently the wolf had injured himself while shredding the door with his claws.

"Can you Apparate?" asked Harry.

"Um, not really. I was kinda preoccupied last year, while everybody was getting lessons."

"Right," said Harry, deliberately leaving off the "planning Dumbledore's murder."

There was a brief instant of silence, then a splintering crash as the wolf hurled itself against the door. Both eyed the armoire apprehensively as the scratching resumed. It was still in place, but the door was clearly giving way.

"It'll never hold," gasped Harry. "We've got to get to a fireplace."

"Right," grunted Malfoy. "Maybe you can conjure up a nice thick steak so we can distract him?" He handed back Harry's wand.

Harry shook his head. "Won't work. He'd rather kill his dinner himself than accept a handout. Wolves don't exactly trust gifts."

"I *really* wish I'd paid more attention in Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Malfoy miserably.

That was just too much for Harry. Despite the circumstances, he laughed, loudly and vigorously. Draco stared a moment, affronted, then broke into laughter himself. It lasted only until the next bout of scratching at the door, but it somehow cleared their heads a bit.

Malfoy gritted his teeth and fixed Harry in a firm gaze. "I think we both know how this ends. You Apparate, Potter. Now."

Harry shook his head. "Hark at you! When'd you turn into a Gryffindor? I'm not just going to leave you to get eaten alive!"

Malfoy rolled his eyes in utter contempt. "Better me than both of us! Look, if you go now, maybe you can find someone who can come back for me--someone who can do Side-Along Apparation. Unless you can do it?" Malfoy added hopefully. The answer showed in Harry's eyes, and Malfoy nodded and turned away.

"I'm not leaving," said Harry. "I don't know where people go while Lupin's like this. Even if they're on Diagon Alley, it could take hours to find them--it's not like the entire Order can just crowd into a booth at the Leaky Cauldron for the night! Wherever they are, they're probably laying low!"

"And they might be right outside in the courtyard, sitting around a campfire! It doesn't matter, Potter; get out of here! I'll take my chances." Harry didn't even dignify that with an answer, just a scoff.

Again the scratching stopped and a splintering crash issued from the door. The wizards turned as one toward the great dresser, which shook but remained in place.

"Mother of Merlin!" whispered Malfoy.

A flash of fire between the wizards sent both of them leaping backwards. Harry recovered first, recognizing a familiar face as the flames flickered out. "Fawkes!" The phoenix landed on his outstretched arm immediately and spread his wings, wrapping them around Harry.

"No! Draco too!" Harry said, pushing the wings away from himself. Malfoy stared at the spectacle in confusion, even as another crash shook the dresser. Knowing there was no time for explanations, Harry simply yanked Malfoy's wrist to draw him close, and turned back to Fawkes. "Now," he said, undisguised relief in his voice.

Fawkes, however, leaned back as far away from Malfoy as he could. "What?" Harry said, baffled.

Fawkes made a sad keening sound, pointing with his beak at Malfoy. He brought the sharp tip within a hair's breadth of Malfoy's throat, but did not touch him. He was aiming straight at the Dark Mark.

"Uh, Potter, what's he doing?" Malfoy stammered.

Harry sighed. "I'm not sure. I think your Mark is too much for him; it's a corruption of *his* magic." Malfoy scowled incomprehendingly. "Volde--er, You-Know-Who's wand has a feather from Fawkes in it. My guess is he can't bear to touch you with that Mark on."

It was Malfoy's turn to scoff. "Figures."

Once again, the wolf hurled its body against the bedroom door, and this time the armoire lurched forward an inch. Fawkes hopped up onto Harry's shoulder and again attempted to envelop him in his wings. "No!" Harry said, gripping Malfoy's arm. "I won't just leave him here!"

The wolf's muzzle poked from behind the dresser. Both it and Fawkes growled menacingly, but then all went silent as blue flame exploded about the three of them.

It was pitch black where they landed, but Harry was too excited to care. "Fawkes! I knew you could do it," he said joyfully as he lit his wand.

They were standing beside the Black Family Tapestry. Harry groaned when he recognized it. Fawkes had only been able to move them a short distance and buy some time. They weren't safe yet.

"*Incendio!*" cried Harry, aiming his wand at the fireplace. As the flames illuminated the drawing room, he cast a locking spell on the door. "Come on, Draco, we're not done yet!" He glanced back at the other wizard and froze.

Malfoy was blackened from head to toe. His clothing and hair were singed, covered completely with a fine layer of ash, but that was not the worst of it. Every last bit of Malfoy's exposed skin had been burned away. His hands, neck, and face were left with nothing but a slick sheen of sooty fluid over the raw, pink dermis. Malfoy looked dangerously close to fainting from the shock, and frankly Harry didn't feel too steady at the sight either.

Muffled crashes came from overhead, followed by pounding footsteps, as the wolf broke into the conservatory at last and sought in vain for his prey. As if all that weren't enough, Fawkes, staring at Malfoy in horror, let out a strangled, sorrowful cry and burst into a brilliant fireball himself.

The phoenix flames were uncomfortably hot, but did not burn Harry; nonetheless, he batted the flaming mass from his shoulder reflexively. It bounced off the tapestry, which immediately caught fire, then landed on the wool carpet. The initial flare had already subsided, however, leaving a pile of ash on the rug.

"Oh, Fawkes," wailed Harry. He dropped to his knees before the coals and picked up the wrinkled chick as gently as he could. This was nothing short of a disaster, but he had no choice but to keep moving. The wolf presently recognized that his meal had somehow escaped him, and his snarl of outrage carried through the two intervening floors. It was followed immediately by more footsteps, this time coming down the stairs.

Leaping to his feat, Harry reached for Malfoy's shoulder, then hesitated; if all of the other wizard's skin was burnt away, he might not be able to withstand being touched. At that moment, however, Malfoy's knees gave way and he lurched to steady himself. As he did so, part of his burnt sweater crumbled away, revealing intact skin underneath.

"Heavens above, Draco!" Harry put his hand in the center of Malfoy's back and urged him toward the fireplace. "Come on! You have to walk, you can do it!" Malfoy was already shivering hard and stumbling over his own feet.

The racing paws of the wolf made clicks and scratches through the ceiling overhead. It was hunting for them, only one floor away. "Move, move, move," Harry chanted frantically, stuffing Fawkes inside the remains of Draco's sweater so he could have both hands free to push the other wizard along. There was no point in remaining silent or trying to hide; the smell of burnt skin would soon be like a radar beacon to the wolf.

They were barely a meter from the fireplace when Malfoy finally collapsed in shock.

Harry caught him by the shoulders, but had no choice except to set him down. The Floo Powder was kept in the rolltop desk near the hearth; he had to fetch it before they could go any further. Harry flung up the tambour and immediately found the powder in its usual spot. "Thank you, Remus," he breathed, knowing that it was Lupin's penchant for order and simplicity that kept such things organized and in their places. If the man's tidiness saved them from becoming the werewolf's next meal, so much the better.

Harry snatched up far more Floo Powder than necessary in his haste, and flung it into the fire. The wolf was once again thundering down the stairs. The tips of the flames

had not yet changed from yellow to green when Harry put his head in the fireplace and shouted, "The Weasley Burrow!" He had never tried to send an unconscious person through the Floo, and hoped that the connection would keep as he fetched Malfoy.

As he raised Malfoy's body with the *Mobilicorpus*, a head appeared in the fireplace. "Harry? What's--" The speaker, Arthur Weasley, was cut off as the wolf reached the drawing room door and drowned his question with a tremendous crash. There wasn't even time to turn around and check the door. Harry simply shoved Malfoy into the fireplace, feet first, right into poor Mr. Weasley's face. Several voices shouted through the Floo as Malfoy began to emerge into the Burrow's kitchen.

The Floo was not meant to be used this way--one was supposed to step completely in to the first fireplace and climb out of the other, not straddle the two of them at once. They were supposed to share a magical link, not a physical one, yet Malfoy's horizontal stance forced them into a real alignment. The chimney creaked in protest and clouds of soot began to whirl, throwing sparks and ashes into Harry's face. He held his wand steady and pushed on Malfoy's shoulders with all his might.

There was another mighty smash against the door, this time accompanied by the unmistakeable sound of splintering wood.

Harry had just enough time to place his hand on top of Malfoy's head and give it a final shove when the strain on the chimney overwhelmed the bricks and mortar. The entire structure imploded, sending a huge, dense cloud of soot and dust billowing out of the fireplace.

Coughing, blinded, and utterly alone, Harry turned to face the wolf.

He strained to listen. There was nothing at first but the clattering of bricks tumbling down inside the fireplace. The wolf snorted and coughed as well, and Harry realized that it, too, was handicapped by the cloud, at least for the moment. Dust clung to the cold sweat covering his body; for a brief instant, he had an absurd mental image of himself so encased in soot and powdered masonry that the wolf mistook him for a statue.

*Fat chance.* Harry cast the *Aguamenti* Charm wordlessly and rinsed the filth from his eyes, following with a Bubble-Head Charm to keep them clear. The dust and darkness made it impossible to see, but at least he could breathe--and more importantly, the wolf could not. *For the moment, anyway,* Harry thought grimly.

He could hear it pattering around, but that was little comfort; that only meant it could hear him as well. Judging by the sounds, the wolf was pacing back and forth before the doorway. *He's not stupid. He's blocking my escape,* thought Harry. All the wolf had to do was wait for the dust to settle, and he'd have a straight shot at his prey.

Harry knew he had to Apparate out of here while he still had the advantage, but the threat of immediate, deadly peril had his heart racing and his thoughts whirling. He could barely wrap his mind around a Destination, let alone the Determination and whatever-the-heck that last "D" stood for. Harry vowed to hex Wilkie Twycross and his useless mnemonic the next time he saw him--if he survived the wolf, that is.

Keeping his wand at the ready, Harry tracked the movements of the wolf, still sneezing and snorting to clear his nose of dust. *Maybe I can face him off till morning like this, if I just keep the dust moving and stay out of reach.* The trouble with that plan was that Harry had no knowledge of any dust-levitating spell, and the wolf was both larger and more agile than he. He gnashed his teeth--more thinking along those lines and he'd work himself into a panic.

He was so startled by the sound of a human voice that he stumbled and fell.

"HARRY!" It was Ondossi, calling from the kitchen downstairs. Claws gouged the floor as the wolf ground to a halt, uncertain whether he should abandon his trapped quarry to pursue something potentially easier to actually find. Ondossi let out a wild sound that rumbled throughout the house, which was undoubtedly the call of a sick moose or some similar animal. The wolf came to an abrupt halt and made its decision; it spun about noisily and bounded down the stairs.

Harry swore, picking himself up and bolting after Lupin. He hadn't let Malfoy sacrifice himself so he could escape, nor would he let Tura do it either. He dashed past the screeching portrait of Lady Black, thinking, "Oh sure, NOW you make some noise," and rounded onto the kitchen stairs.

He took the last few steps in a single leap, but froze at the bottom. The wolf was on top of the long table, poised to leap at Ondossi, but it had stopped short, hackles raised on the back of its neck. Glancing beyond it, Harry saw why: Ondossi was in the process of morphing into a cobra. Already her head was that of a snake, her throat flattened into the flaring hood. Her arms, however, were still fading into the side of her body, which was elongated and coiled in a rather gruesome manner. Harry watched, spellbound, until the transformation was complete.

With a low growl, the wolf took a step backward, then another and another, until its back foot slipped off the edge of the table. This was Harry's chance to sidle over to the fireplace, emerald flames still flickering within, welcoming him to the Floo and safety. He edged toward it, but unfortunately, the predator in the center of the room had sized up the situation and decided to revert to its original plan of devouring Harry. It whirled around with a vicious snarl, and prepared to spring.

Harry heard the sound before he saw anything, and it took him a moment to realize what happened. The wolf was a flurry of fur and claws and snapping teeth, yelping and scrambling back to the other side of the table. The cobra had slithered beneath the table and risen between the wolf and Harry. She must have spat venom right in the wolf's face, which was now stinging its mouth and eyes.

*We're OUTTA HERE!* Harry thought, hooking an arm around the snake and charging toward the fireplace. Before he managed a single step, however, white-hot pain exploded in his shoulder.

"Tura!" Harry croaked. At first he thought the werewolf had bitten him, but no, it was on the other side of the room, frantically licking its nose and wiping its eyes. It wasn't Remus who bit him, it was Ondossi. He regarded her in wide-eyed horror.

A flash of comprehension appeared in the snake's eyes, followed by a most un-reptilian look of horror and chagrin. "Harry! Oh, no! I wasn't expecting--"

He staggered, nodding in understanding; her reflexes were those of the snake, not the human, and she had reacted on instinct. "S'okay," he gasped, dropping to his knees, his hand gliding over her waxy scales. "Le's jus' get to the Floo."

This was no easy feat, with venom flooding his veins. It burned like a Cruciatus curse and his limbs felt wobbly and weak. Ondossi was absolutely beside herself, blathering in apology as she wriggled protectively beside him. "Even though I just spat, that was still full of venom, but I have the antidote at Hogwarts. I'll get it as soon as you're safe. I'm so sorry! *Elbereth*, Harry, NEVER grab a snake by the middle like that, haven't I taught you anything?"

He rolled his eyes and steadied himself against the wall, doing his best to follow her persistent tugging toward the hearth. She suddenly whipped out from his grasp and twisted away, her hood flaring again and jaws open wide. Harry knew without looking that the wolf had recovered enough to pursue him again. "Don't bite it!" Harry demanded. "Just spit, or you'll kill him!"

She rose up menacingly to strike the wolf, which obviously intended to prevent his escape, snake or no snake. "Gee, ya think?" railed the cobra. "Get out, so I won't have to bite!"

Foggy from the pain, her command seemed logical to Harry and he crawled toward the fireplace. He did not look back at the sounds of scuffling and spitting behind him until he entered the hearth. "The Weasley Burrow," he said, raising his head at last to grab the cobra and escape.

The sight made him cry out. The wolf's fur was matted with venom; he'd been able to dodge her spit. Worse still, he'd managed to maneuver between her and the fireplace. With one lucky snap, he could bite her in half, and now her escape route was cut off. Tura was going to have to fight for her life against Remus. Neither was likely to survive the confrontation.

A tear trickled down Harry's cheek, and with a groan of agony, he lurched back into the kitchen.



"NO YOU DON'T!" Hands reached from the emerald flames behind him, yanking hard on his robes.

"Sirius," Harry gasped softly, wondering how much worse this was going to get. "They'll kill each other," he panted. "Can't let them. Gotta use Legilimency. Something."

Sirius ignored him, pulling him into the Floo Network. "No!" he cried again, leaning against his godfather's grip. He knew what Sirius must be thinking; he never really liked Ondossi anyway, and he'd sussed out that she was the cause of Harry's recent misery. Sirius was probably happy to let the wolf devour her. "You don't understand!" he implored. No one but Ron and Hermione knew about the cobra; Sirius had no idea that Remus was in as much danger as Tura.

"Knock it off, Harry! Stop fighting me!" It was as though Sirius had gone deaf; he didn't acknowledge Harry's plea with so much as a flicker of his eye.

In despair, Harry jerked his head toward the standoff not a meter away in the kitchen. Sirius looked up at last. His jaw dropped, then he swore. "They'll kill each other!"

Harry closed his eyes and nodded, in too much pain to say, "Ya think?"

Sirius pulled him to his feet. "Go, Harry. The Weasley Burrow!" he shouted into the Floo. He shoved Harry toward the Network, but Harry gripped his wrist.

"Won't leave them! My fault!"

Sirius froze, staring as though seeing him for the first time. "Mother of Merlin, Harry... you've been BITTEN!" His eyes widened and he flinched, but to his credit, did not let go of his godson's forearms.

Harry stared back in confusion, then snapped to. "Snake," he panted, "not the wolf." The venom had spread to his diaphragm; it hurt to breathe.

Sirius held him at arms' length a moment longer, then nodded. "Snake bite. Venomous, no doubt."

Harry knew he was only seconds away from being tossed into the Floo. "I won't leave them Sirius!" he said, his tone as low and firm as he could muster.

Sirius rose to his full height, his jaw set in determination. "You need a Healer. I'll handle these two." He gave Harry a tremendous shove, which he was too weak to resist. Harry whirled off in a vortex of emerald flames, barely aware of his arms swinging wildly about him, scraping iron grills and chimney bricks along the entire length of the Network.

He stumbled backwards out of the fireplace at the Burrow, but never hit the ground; a dozen hands caught him and hauled him into the kitchen. Harry tried to protest, but someone picked up his knees as another threaded strong arms under his shoulders, and they carted him off to the living room in an instant. "He's been bitten!" one of them shouted. A green-robed Healer was already at his side, her wand pointed at his heart. A tall, slender man with long braids (who seemed to be her assistant) laid his hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry felt a tremendous pull, as though the hand were some sort of vacuum sucking the venom from his blood. It worked; the pain cut back considerably, boosting his courage at the same time. "I'm all right," he quickly gasped. "Let me go back!"

The room had gone silent at the news of the bite, and now every eye was fixed upon him in horror. "Oh, for pity's sake!" he said. "It wasn't the wolf--if it was, I'd be changing, wouldn't I?" What was the matter with these people?

"Harry, shut up and calm down!" It was Malfoy, calling hoarsely from somewhere on the other side of the room. A ripple of activity began to spread from the direction of his muffled voice.

"Bugger that! Sirius is back there, between a werewolf and a cobra!" Harry struggled to sit upright despite the venom remaining in his system, until the crowd parted and he caught sight of Malfoy. His face and hands were wrapped in bandages, leaving only a slit for his mouth and nose. Even his eyes were covered.

"Potter, you idiot, shut up!" Malfoy rasped again. "You're speaking Parseltongue!"

*Oh.*

Harry gazed around the room once more, taking in the wide, frightened stares. Of course he was speaking Parseltongue--he always did in the presence of snakes, and he never noticed when he was speaking it or hearing it. *That's why Sirius didn't listen to me,* he thought in self-reproach. *It was all just hissing to him.*

For the first time, Harry noted the grim chill in the Healer's eyes. He looked closer and skimmed her thoughts, learning that the wand poised over his chest was not there to heal him, but to kill him if the need arose. It was widely believed, after all, that only the Darkest wizards were Parselmouths.

Harry eased back down onto the couch, concentrating on his language. "It's all right. I was bitten by a cobra. An Animagus who became a cobra. It's all right." The wand remained pointed at his chest, but her expression softened. "Sirius... He's still back there, with both of them," he said entreatingly. A quick look beyond her eyes told him how to ease her concern. "I've, ah, always been a Parselmouth," he added sheepishly. All the faces he could see either cringed anxiously, or nodded with a knowing glance at his forehead.

At last the Healer nodded too, and waved her wand over him in a complex pattern. "You've been poisoned, Harry Potter," she said, her voice soft and soothing. "You must rest."

Her magic was stronger than a sleeping potion. Harry raised his head and whispered, "Please," but his energy drained away. The Healer smiled reassuringly and brushed his eyes closed with her hand, and Harry was out for the count.

He didn't remember sleeping, or dreaming. When he woke, the room was dark and empty. The Healer dozed in an armchair beside his bed, and her apprentice stood leaning against the sill of the main window, a silhouette against a pre-dawn sky tinged with a hint of red. Harry reckoned the lump of blankets on the other couch was Draco Malfoy, judging by the mummy-like hand dangling from the cushion.

Harry tried to sit up, but the Healer's eyes snapped open as soon as he moved. "Be still," she said, placing the tip of her wand delicately on his chest. A warm wave of magic passed through him, relaxing his muscles so deeply that he gave up all thoughts of rising, but he had to speak.

"Tura... Reem?" He didn't have the energy for the "s-es" in "Sirius."

The Healer hushed him with a wave of her hand. "One moment," she said, and scurried to the kitchen, returning with Molly Weasley.

Even in the dim and shadowy firelight, Harry could tell she'd been crying despite her stoic smile. She bustled to the couch and knelt beside him, stroking his hair. "By the blood of Merlin, Harry! What a fright you gave us all!"

"He still needs rest," said the Healer gently, "but you can talk for a few minutes." She slipped quietly off to the kitchen.

Harry could talk, but his limbs still felt too heavy to move. "Please," he said, "what's happened to the others?"

Mrs. Weasley shook her head, her smile fading. "We don't know, Harry-love. We don't dare risk opening the Floo again--not until morning. When you came through, we could hear the wolf, it was... Let's just say it sounded very, very angry. And close. We couldn't risk it following you back here. Or worse, getting caught in the Network and stepping out Merlin-knows-where."

"But Sirius--"

"I know, Harry!" Mrs. Weasley said tearfully. "I know. Arthur and Bill tried to stop him, but you know how he is. We should have put him in a Body-Bind after Draco turned up, but no one thought of it in all the chaos. The kitchen was full of people from the Order, finishing up their dinner and the day's business, and suddenly this horribly wounded boy just pops out of the Floo! With those burns, we didn't even recognize him at first.

"No one knew where he'd come from. We always check every single room in Headquarters before closing it up for Lupin's time. Arthur and Sirius had assumed you'd skipped off with Draco--they were furious with you! They reckoned you'd forced him to take you to You-Know-Who, once and for all. A team was assembling here to follow you.

"Ondossi was supposed to be their guide. She put her hand on Draco's head and forced him awake." Mrs. Weasley paused gritting her teeth. "That was quite unpleasant, Harry, with his burns... Anyway, he blurted out 'House of Black' before he, *ahem*, fainted, and next thing we knew, *she* was diving into the fireplace like nobody's business."

She paused to rub her own forehead for a moment. "Well. You can imagine how that went over. Arthur had heard you, so we knew you were back there, too, but no one knew what to do. There's a strict rule, Harry, set down by Remus himself. NO ONE is to go into Headquarters during 'his time.' The last one out is supposed to block the Floo so no one can accidentally wander in. He's determined not to spread his lycanthropy.

"You must have dislodged the block when you opened the Floo from the other side. It was only a one-way block; no one ever worried about the wolf using the Floo Powder to get *out*, after all. Even if he managed to find it, he'd probably just eat it, or roll in it... Anyway, as I said, Remus made most people swear an oath not to enter the house under any circumstances during the full moon. Arthur *couldn't* follow, or Kingsley, or Tonks of course. But apparently Remus never got around to Ondossi.

"Of course, the whole house was in an uproar, but Arthur loudly reminded everyone of their oaths, and also that Fawkes would never let any harm come to you. That calmed people down a bit. Arthur stood guard at the Floo, ready to pull you through if you entered, or shut it down if the wolf tried to go in." She shuddered at the memory; it would take some very fast thinking to slam the Floo shut in the wolf's face.

"I couldn't bear to just stand there watching, so I started to tend to Draco's burns, and that's when I found poor little Fawkes inside his shirt. I should have just quietly tucked him into my apron, Harry-love, but I was so surprised when something *moved* like that..."

Harry nearly sat up in panic. "Where *is* Fawkes?"

"Shh, hush, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said quietly. "Hagrid has him. The poor little fellow was just beside himself; he just curled up on your chest and howled his little heart out until Hagrid arrived. There wasn't a dry eye in the living room for a while. But Hagrid calmed him down and put him on his beard, and Fawkes just burrowed right in. He's fine."

Harry sighed. "I'm a terrible caretaker." He silenced Mrs. Weasley's protest with a sharp look. "I forced him to move me and Draco away from the wolf. That's how Draco got burned, and right afterward, Fawkes burned up as well."

"You saved Draco's life, Harry."

"I hurt Fawkes," he said flatly.

After a moment of heavy quiet, he spoke up again. "Let me guess: As soon as Sirius realized Fawkes was ~~there~~ and not with me, he plowed into the Floo before you could even blink."

"Just so," said Mrs. Weasley, dabbing at her eyes with a hanky.

Harry grimaced. This was a nightmare. "Has there been anything at all since then?"

"Nothing," she said, but she glanced away and he knew that wasn't the full story.

"There's more," said Harry. She sat back a bit and turned her head. "Mrs. Weasley, please don't make me pull it out of you," he added, hating how cold he sounded.

She sat up with a sharp intake of breath, then held her chin high. "Very well, Harry," she said, her voice dignified and sad at the same time. "Arthur did barricade himself in Hagrid's cabin, so he could use that Floo and keep an eye on things without endangering... anyone else. But as I said, he's heard nothing. By the time he settled in, the house had gone silent. He's been checking in all night, but there's nothing to report."

Mrs. Weasley dabbed her eyes again. "The sun's just coming up; he, Hagrid, and Poppy will go in as soon as it clears the horizon." She paused, studying him, then leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "You must try to rest, Harry-love. We'll all know soon." She stood and padded softly to the kitchen.

*We'll know they're all dead*, Harry thought miserably. If either Sirius or Tura had somehow survived, they would have come back. As for Lupin, if the wolf were alive, it would have come sniffing whenever Mr. Weasley popped his head through the Floo. Even if it had gorged itself on fresh meat all night, it would still be curious.

The Healer's apprentice came to Harry's side with a bowl of steaming liquid. Harry made no protest as the man sat down and dipped his fingers into the bowl, then began dabbing the potion onto Harry's face and chest, tracing unknown runes on his skin.

It smelled flowery and metallic, unlike anything Harry had ever made in Potions. Every whiff of it seemed to lighten his mood, but Harry didn't *want* to cheer up at a time like this. The Healer noticed his furrowed brow and painted a figure-eight over it with a fresh dollop of the warm elixir.

"You feel such pain," he said in a strange accent, "yet none here know what transpired on this night. You assume the worst, but you do not *know*. This balm is for your heart as well as your body, young one. If you permit, it will help you find your courage and faith."

Harry eyed him skeptically. "What is it?"

The tall man smiled. "It is nothing you have seen before. Something special from my home, far away." The Healer spoke with such quiet confidence that Harry meekly accepted the explanation.

The man's long, dark hair fell forward as he bowed his head and placed his hand on Harry's wounded shoulder. He muttered something Harry could not understand, and once again a warm, gentle pull seemed to reach into his very veins to coax out any toxins that remained. Even his scar began to tingle, a very startling sensation from an area that rarely felt anything but pain.

Harry regarded the stranger with newfound awe. "Who are you?"

The man smiled again, with a faraway expression. "None have asked my name in many, many years, *nin ion*," he said, returning to his efforts with the potion. "You might call me 'Peredhil.' That is my title, I suppose; it is hard to translate."

Harry looked beyond the man's eyes without really meaning to, but he was curious what this "title" meant. What he found from this skimming was very much like the rich, dynastic memories he always received from Fawkes. "Half-Blood?" he said hazily, not quite sure how he'd derived that idea.

The man laughed merrily. "I believe that is as accurate as any I could devise."

Harry blinked a few times, still reeling from the depth of the memories he'd glimpsed. This was no ordinary wizard; no human mind he'd ever touched looked anything like this one. "Why have you come?" Harry whispered, suddenly afraid.

"*Curunir firion!*" he chastised, though Harry had no idea what the words meant. "It is true that I once was a warrior, but I am a Healer. I have come to help you, not to slay you." He raised his brows. "If you would reach into the minds of others, little wizard, you must either be very thorough, or withhold your judgement," he chided gently.

Peredhil studied him carefully, then picked up the bowl and took a sip of the potion. He dipped one finger in it and pressed a drop to Harry's mouth, then sat back expectantly. Harry reckoned he'd drank it himself to prove it was safe, so he cautiously licked the cooling droplet from his lip.

Harry closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the rush of what seemed like liquid health in his mouth. This stuff was to Pepperup Potion as Legilimency was to exchanging hastily scribbled notes in class. Nonetheless, he fought not to swallow it, unwilling to accept such comfort for his wounds while Tura, Sirius, and Remus lay dead because of him. The Healer simply sat and watched a moment, then put another drop on his lip.

"There will be plenty of time to mourn your friends if they are truly lost," said Peredhil quietly. "But there are many ways this night can end, more than you can even imagine. Only a small number of these possibilities end in grief. There's no point in languishing in it yet, young one. Learn the truth before deciding the facts."

It was hard to argue with this eloquent, haunting wizard, but Harry managed a weak scoff. "There may be other endings, but it's most *likely* they're all dead."

The Healer cocked his head and regarded him sternly. "The flaw in your argument, *nin ion*, is that you cannot use the odds to predict the outcome of a single event. Improbable things happen every minute. Magic is proof of that; life itself is also proof. You do not know what has happened, but you have assumed your friends are dead. Consider for a moment that it is just as easy to *assume* your friends have survived the night, as to *assume* they have not. Or, if you cannot summon that much hope, then perhaps it is best to assume nothing."

"Easier said than done," mumbled Harry.

Peredhil smiled wanly. "Indeed, young one. But it will come more naturally with time. Tonight, however, you must make a leap of faith. The potion will help you. You must recover quickly, if for no other reason than your beloved *lithpelos*--Fawkes, you name him--needs your strength. He has rebirthed far too many times in recent years, and he grows weary."

A tear formed in Harry's eye, but the Healer clicked his teeth. "Nay, *nin ion*, this is no fault of yours. It is your bad luck to live at the cusp between two Great Ages, and such times are inherently dangerous. Fawkes came to you to serve, and he will weather it, but he, too, suffers, and can feel despair. Let your heart be at peace tonight, and recover your strength for tomorrow. Indeed, tomorrow has almost arrived." He indicated the morning twilight with a broad gesture toward the window, then rose from his seat, handing the bowl of potion to Harry.

"Drink, little *curunir*. You are not the first to confront great evil, nor will you be the last, and it is indeed a cruel fate. There are forces at play that neither you nor your enemy fully understand. I wish you luck, Harry Potter." He turned away.

"You're leaving?" said Harry.

"I came to you on behalf of the *lithpelos*. But I will not be far, *nin ion*." The Healer made a motion of sipping from an invisible cup, and Harry obediently raised the bowl and drank its entire contents. He fell back to the pillow as the potion coursed through him, filling him with clean, healing magic.

When Harry opened his eyes, he thought at first that he was literally glowing with golden light. He blinked a bit, slowly realizing that he was bathed in sunlight. It seemed like no time at all had passed, yet it must have been hours already. He bolted upright; by now someone must know what happened at Grimmauld Place!

"Harry!" It was Ron. Harry turned left, toward the voice, and with an even greater start, realized he was no longer at the Burrow. Ron had leapt up from the next cot in the familiar row of beds of the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts.

"What happened?" Harry was startled by the strength and clarity of his own voice--he'd been too groggy and weak to do much more than mumble the last time he spoke.

"You've been out more than a day, mate! Madam Pomfrey's been going crazy trying to figure--"

"No, no," Harry burst out over him, "at Headquarters? What happened at Headquarters? Sirius, Tura..."

"Ooh, right," said Ron comprehendingly. "Well, if you turn that way..." he pointed to Harry's right. Harry spun around instantly, to behold Sirius, Lupin, and Ondossi, lined up like dominoes in the next three beds. All three looked battered and worn, but Sirius and Lupin both raised their heads and grinned at him.

Harry leaped to the edge of Sirius's cot in one bound. He said nothing as he pulled his godfather into a crushing hug, so great was his relief to see him alive and whole. When he finally let go and ran round to Lupin's cot, he found his voice long enough to say, "Remus!" before throwing his arms around him. Breathing in with his face pressed into Lupin's shoulder, he realized that Lupin's hair smelled just like the musky, earthen scent of the wolf. It made him shudder and grip more tightly at the same time.

"I can't believe it! I thought I'd lost all of you!" Harry said breathlessly, standing up straight again. He looked at Ondossi, but her eyes were closed; she seemed to be asleep, although it didn't seem possible after all the commotion. He wanted *so much* to run to her side and scoop her up anyway, but like a sledgehammer to the chest, he was hit with certainty that she wasn't asleep, she just wanted him to leave her alone.

The smile vanished from his face, and his hands fell uselessly to the edge of Lupin's cot. It lasted only a second or two, long enough for Sirius and Lupin to exchange a knowing glance, then Harry recovered his composure and turned his gaze back to his friends. "I'm so glad you're all right," he said, deeply sincere but without quite as much joy as a moment before.

Lupin bowed his head sheepishly, but Sirius just laughed. "Ah, you and your worrying. I told you I'd handle these two, didn't I? You know I never lie--at least not to you."

Ron came up behind Harry with a chair in each hand, and the two of them sat between the two cots. Harry looked at them and shook his head. "So tell it! Somebody--anybody!"

In an uncharacteristic fashion, Sirius bowed his head with a shy grin, and Lupin took over. "Well, I don't exactly remember the specifics, but it seems that Sirius's magic finally came through when the chips were down."

Harry's jaw fell, and Sirius actually blushed, still grinning and studying the hem of his sheet. "You Morphed?" burst Harry. "Snuffles is back?"

"Looks that way," Sirius said, raising his eyes at last. "I guess I just needed a little extra push to wake up the wizard in me again." For a moment, all four of them just sat and grinned.

"Oh, Harry, you should've seen Headquarters!" said Ron. "Someone needs a bit of training about keeping off the furniture! It looks like they chased each other all through the house and then some. Not to mention the drawing room--bits of chimney all over everything. But the best part is the portrait of Lady Black." He gave Sirius a knowing grin, and a bark of laughter immediately followed.

"If only we'd known before, eh, Reem?" said Sirius. "It was spelled against everything you could expect in a proper Pureblood household, but Mummy Dearest never imagined a werewolf would set 'paw' in her house. Ondossi got up on top of the portrait and the wolf just went berserk! Ripped every last thread out of the frame and left it

all in a shredded, *silent* heap on the floor. No more screaming hysteria, ever!"

Harry joined in the satisfied laughter, then asked, "What was Tura doing on top of the picture?"

Again, Lupin lowered his eyes with a guilty frown. He and Sirius both glanced at the last bed, then Sirius answered somberly. "She sort of needed to escape, Harry. Moony--that is, the wolf--managed to catch her a couple of times. He, ah, got a claw in her at one point and did some real damage." Harry felt the color drain from his face and reminded himself that she was alive, right there, just a few feet away.

Sirius continued. "But the picture frame was the perfect spot; she just laid herself out across the top of it, all stretched out and flat. She stayed up there while Moony jumped up after her over and over--he was pretty angry over that whole spitting business. Once the portrait was ripped out, he couldn't get any purchase along the wall, so he gave up and took out his frustration on the canvas instead. Really, it all worked out in the best possible way. I'd chased and fought with him all over the house, just as Ron said, but I was getting so tired I could hardly hold my shape. But once he finished with the painting, he just howled a few times and went to sleep. I think my mother was bad for his digestion."

Lupin nodded. "Tasted horrible, too. And from a wolf, that's really saying something."

Harry bit his lower lip and looked at Ondossi again. "How is she?"

Lupin and Sirius exchanged another glance. "She, ah, hasn't really woken up yet," said Sirius, as Lupin, too, bit his lip. "Now, Moony..." said Sirius firmly, but Lupin raised his hand for silence.

"Hagrid cared for her all day yesterday; they just moved her in here this morning," he said, holding his head up, though he looked like he'd rather dive into a deep hole. "She couldn't transform right away. She was... One of her wounds was too severe. The clawing, it ripped her open from what would be her chin to her belly button."

"Usually wounds don't matter much," said Sirius. "A lot of them just disappear when you re-Transfigure yourself, and even the bigger ones will heal to some extent. But you do have to have a certain level of structural integrity to transform. She probably would have turned inside-out..." Sirius fell silent as Harry paled even further.

Ron patted him on the back. "But she's right as rain now, Harry. Hagrid saw to her the whole time, when he wasn't feeding Fawkes. He put her in a big basket with a lid, and a pillow inside, and kept her right next to the fire so she wouldn't be chilly. Fang tried to sniff her once and she spat on him. It got all over Slughorn, too; he was bringing her a potion at the time. So you know that made her feel better."

Harry smirked. That *would* have cheered her up.

"You startled us all a bit, though," said Sirius. "Molly said you'd been awake that morning, but when she went to tell you the good news, no one could rouse you. Madam Pomfrey's been wracking her brains trying to figure out why; all her spells said you were the veritable picture of health."

Harry shrugged. "I was. I took that potion that Peredhil gave me; I guess it was a bit too strong."

The other wizards suddenly frowned. "Peredhil?" said Lupin.

"Maybe you haven't met him yet," said Harry. He turned to Ron. "That tall Healer with the really long hair? The one who took the poison out of my shoulder?"

Lupin looked at him with increasing alarm. "Harry... the only Healer in the Order is Madam Lumbago."

"I went home that night as soon as I heard," added Ron uneasily. "She was looking after you, Harry. I never saw any strange bloke at the Burrow, tall or otherwise."

## 37: Ways and Means

### Chapter 37 of 50

The Order recovers from Lupin's furry little problem, and the import of Draco's adventure is brought to light.

"But why my room?" Ron wailed into the fireplace.

"Don't you start it, Ronald Bilius," came the voice of his mother. "It's bad enough having a few dozen houseguests all of a sudden, without having someone *who isn't even here* complaining about the sleeping arrangements. Draco needs peace and quiet so he can recover from his burns, and your room is the most remote. He's still wrapped in bandages, for Merlin's sake; it's not like he's going to be pulling your old toys off the shelf and breaking them!"

"But Mum! He's *Malfoy!* Malfoy the *ferret boy!* I don't want him sleeping in my bed!"

Mrs. Weasley's head poked further into the Floo. "Not another word! If you'd care to come home and add on an extra room for him, you're certainly free to do so! Otherwise, Ron, I suggest you get used to it!" With a shower of sparks, she disappeared, and Ron sat back in his chair before the common room hearth.

"How do you like that?" he grouched. "Betrayed by my own mum. She could've put him in Percy's old room, it's quiet enough."

"Brilliant, Ron," said Hermione. "Put a burn victim in a room used for storage by Fred and George. I can just see it now: Malfoy fumbling blindly for a glass of water, putting his hand into a box of trick wands or punching telescopes. Next thing you know, he needs another week to recover from his new injuries. Besides, Percy's room is big enough for four people, and the Order needs the space."

"Maybe you should volunteer *your* bedroom for Ferret Boy." Ron growled.

Hermione looked as though she wished she, too, could simply disappear in a burst of flames, but she settled for rolling her eyes and giving Ron the cold shoulder. Offended, Ron turned to Harry-and-Viktor for support.

"Don't look at me," said Harry. "My old bedroom was demolished, remember?" He grinned weakly. "Come on, Ron, it's not so bad. He can't even see anything for the bandages; what's the harm?"

"I just don't like him laying there gloating that my mattress is lumpier, or my pillow is flatter, than the ones *at the Manor*."

"He's been sleeping on the ground since June," said Harry a little crossly. "He probably thinks it's the best bed he's ever slept in."

Ron glowered, but finally relented. "One smart remark about the Cannons and he's a dead man."

Malfoy had been injured worse than Harry had first realized. Although his clothing had kept the phoenix fire from destroying most of his skin, the heat had penetrated nonetheless and left him covered with lesser burns and blisters. Being magical in origin, these resisted treatment; he had to endure them until they healed. Draco didn't complain, however, once he learned that Fawkes's flames had obliterated the Dark Mark from his throat.

Lupin, too, remained in the Hospital Wing for several days. The cobra venom had damaged his eyes and Madam Pomfrey had to apply compresses around the clock until they could heal completely. Sirius, on the other hand, refused to stay in bed once Harry had awoken, and kept morphing back and forth between his human and canine forms just because he *could*. Madam Pomfrey, who still hadn't quite absorbed the shock of finding Sirius Black alive, in her infirmary, and *welcomed* by the Order, scolded him relentlessly whenever she caught him being Snuffles.

"Stop running around before you knock things over!" "You're shedding all over my nice, clean beds!" "If you jump up there again, you're going outside!" Sirius would wait until she was barely out of sight before transforming again and chasing his tail in pure joy. It made Lupin laugh to see his friend so happy, and that alone was enough reason for Sirius to keep at it.

Harry found that Tura's advice had been spot on: after a few experimental attempts, he was able to use Occlumency to mask his own grief and catapult himself into an eerily numb, depersonalized state that was nonetheless quite able to eat, study, and otherwise function. He returned to classes and began catching up on the mountain of homework that accumulated in his absence, though he spent his study time not in the common room, but at a makeshift desk in the hospital wing.

He told the others that he wanted to keep Remus and Sirius company, but it was no secret that he was there mainly to look after Ondossi. She woke up later on the same day as he, but was weak and groggy from both her injuries and the magical remedies to treat them. Hagrid had stitched up the long wound in the snake with unicorn hair, which had allowed her to morph safely back into human form. Nonetheless, it barely held together and she required all manner of potions to close the wound, grow and strengthen the skin and fascia, and fight the inevitable infections that had set in. Harry sat with his books and parchment beside Remus's bed, absently scratching Snuffles behind the ears and eyeing Tura whenever she moved or made a sound.

When Lupin finally recovered to Madam Pomfrey's satisfaction, Harry and Sirius helped him Floo back to the kitchen of Grimmauld Place. The drawing-room chimney was still under construction. There hadn't been any masons in the Order, so some had to be recruited. It took a few days before they found a family of "blood traitor" wizards in India who did all sorts of construction work.

Harry and Sirius took a quick tour of the damages in Headquarters after tucking Lupin into a chair with a warm blanket and a stack of parchments almost as tall as Harry's pile of backlogged homework. Remus recalled little of that night, but Sirius had no such difficulty and regaled Harry with tales of the destruction. "Reem bit that in half," he said, pointing to a spot in a third-floor bedroom that once contained a large throw pillow. "He'd chased me around the room a dozen times and I was getting tired of leaping over the bed--tallest one in the house, you know--so I tossed it at him. He caught it and gave it a good throttling. Feathers flying everywhere! Then they stuck to his fur, it being all wet from the cobra venom. That really set him off. The venom stung his tongue so he couldn't lick them away, and he ended up rolling for twenty minutes on the rug before they were all off. Gave me a bit of a rest, though; that was when I slunk off and found Ondossi and put her on top of the portrait."

"Why didn't you just get out?" said Harry.

"You don't think I tried?" he answered with a hint of reproach. "It was hard enough getting her down the steps with no hands; her lungs and things kept poking out if I jostled her too much. I'd just made it to the entry hall when Reem stopped thrashing about upstairs. I reckoned he'd be bounding down any second. I couldn't risk it; to do any magic, I'd need to morph back into a man, and if Moony caught up to us..."

Wincing, Harry squeezed his eyes shut. "Understood."

Sirius slowed his pace and began steering Harry toward a door to the courtyard. "Talking of Miss Ondossi..." He let his words hang there in the atmosphere as he opened the door and motioned for Harry to join him outside.

It was cold but sunny, and each of them pulled their arms in tight against their bodies and stepped out from under the eaves. Harry sighed, a long, drawn out exhalation. Sirius had obviously figured out the main problem already, and Harry had no desire to share the ugly details.

Sirius closed his eyes and faced the sun, smiling at the bit of warmth. "In Azkaban, I think I missed the sun most of all," he said simply. "Well, except for you and Remus," he amended, turning back to Harry. He smiled kindly but said no more, letting the silence pry at Harry and work its awkward effects.

"I still don't want to talk about it," Harry said, but it sounded hollow even to his own ears. Sirius only nodded and continued to gaze at the thin layer of snow in the courtyard. Harry studied a drop of water poised on the tip of a branch, glistening in the winter sun and gradually widening until it fell into a tiny crater in the snow beneath. "It... didn't work out," he finally confessed.

Sirius looked completely unsurprised and replied without turning his head. "I asked her why you were so depressed, you know. The morning after Draco was captured, in the drawing room. She wouldn't tell me anything. But I could see it in her eyes, blank as they may be. She's as unhappy as you are. Which makes me wonder if perhaps it was supposed to work out after all..." His voice trailed off, leaving Harry the uncomfortable opportunity of silence once again.

Harry had been able to use Occlumency to get through his schoolwork, but discussing her with his godfather brought all the grief back out in full. "Siri..." His voice cracked.

Sirius immediately turned to Harry and pulled him in tight, letting the wave of anguish roll through him and past him. Once again Harry cried, gripping his godfather like the mast of a tall ship in a storm as sobs wracked his body. Sirius did nothing, said nothing, just held onto Harry until the pain was spent and he caught his breath once again. He loosened his grip when Harry finally raised his head, but remained silent, waiting.

"I did it, Sirius," Harry began. "It's my fault. We spent the whole day together, it was wonderful; she *trusted* me. But she said we couldn't go on because she had a secret that she didn't dare tell me. It wouldn't be fair, since she couldn't be honest. I made her tell it, and it was a shock, but it wasn't anything so terrible once I had a chance to think it through. But in the heat of the moment... Oh, Siri!" He had to stop; the shame was nearly overwhelming.

Sirius rested his cheek against the top of Harry's head. "Lost your temper, then? Said something you really regret?"

Every muscle in Harry's face and neck pulled taut. "Worse," he forced through gritted teeth. He knew he had to continue or he'd never have enough nerve again to confess it. "I struck her down," he blurted, bracing himself for Merlin-only-knew what reaction.

It was nothing short of astounding that Sirius seemed to take this completely in stride. He simply nodded again, slowly and thoughtfully, then began to talk in a calm, kindly voice. "Ah, I see. Not exactly a point of pride; I understand. But it happens, Harry, it happens; I've done it a few times myself."

Harry stiffened, not with disdain or judgment, but pure shock. "You have?" he squeaked.

Sirius leaned back to look him in the face. "It's true, Harry; it's just part of being a wizard. Sometimes your magic escapes you. It's embarrassing, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. Happens to all of us! Don't tell me she's holding it against you--"

"NO, Sirius, that's not it at all!" Harry cut in. "I struck her. With... with my fist. I *hit* her. I knocked her cold, and just left her there in the snow..."

Now it was Sirius's turn to stiffen, but though Harry braced miserably for rejection, his godfather didn't withdraw, not even in the slightest. Sirius had to clear his throat several times, however, before he could speak.

"Well. That is... unlike you," he finally stammered. "Is that why Moody had to substitute--"

"Yeah." He didn't want Sirius to go through the details aloud.

"Right-o, then," said Sirius gamely. "Back to her secret... even though you know it, do you still care--"

"Yeah."

"But she's afraid of you, because--"

"Yeah."

It was amazing how much could be conveyed, both ways, with so few words. Sirius understood all the nuances, right down to the shame of discussing it. He patted Harry's back with the fingertips of one hand, the base of his palm continuing to hold him close. "All right, lad. All right," he said to the beat of his comforting pats. "All right, lad."

Whether it was the relief of confessing or Sirius's unconditional support, Harry didn't know, but courage began bolstering within him for the first time in weeks. "How can I set things right?" he finally whispered.

The patting halted briefly, then continued. "Don't know, Harry. You're in a tight spot, I'm afraid." Sirius sighed. "Accidental magic is one thing, but when it comes to ladies, hitting crosses a line. I'll tell you what, though, Harry, if she'd just taken that and come back for more, I'd be hounding you to move on. The fact she's got self-respect enough to put her foot down is *good*... at least for her sake. But as for *you*...

"I've landed in the doghouse with a few witches in my time," Sirius continued. "Never for getting rough, but, heh-heh, there are definitely other ways to provoke a nice girl. Dating her and her best friend at the same time, for example; a good way to gain two enemies at once, that one. Never underestimate how much girls talk amongst themselves, Harry, even the quiet ones--and they listen like hawks!"

Sirius came to an abrupt halt, clenching the muscles of his belly. He chuckled nervously and straightened up. "Enough of that, I think; another time, over a bottle of Old Ogden's, perhaps. What can you do? There's really nothing for it but to apologize profusely and then let your actions convince her of your true intent."

"Do you think she'll forgive me?" Harry asked plaintively.

The cords in his godfather's throat became taut as he made a wry face. "Merlin only knows, lad. She might never trust you again, though I suppose of all people, she's the best to judge your sincerity. Give her time, Harry. She must know you regret what you've done--anyone can see it. You have to remind her now that you're a good man."

Harry's stomach turned over. *I'm not a good man*, he thought, but kept it to himself.

Sirius shipped him to McGonagall's office through the Floo, where he met up with Krum and headed back to the hospital wing. He parked behind his makeshift desk and wrote his way through half of a 15-inch essay on Long-Term Charms when he felt the peculiar uneasiness of being watched. Viktor was tallying Quidditch statistics under a lamp near the main door, so he turned to Ondossi. She was awake and gazing at him. "Hello, falling star," she said quietly.

His heart leapt into his throat, but he made no sudden moves. He set aside his ink and quill, then the board he'd set across the arms of his chair. He wiped his palms on his robe in a nervous gesture. "Tura."

"Remus?" she asked, frowning.

"He's fine. They all are--Sirius and Malfoy too."

She nodded with relief, which suddenly turned to shock. "I bit you! The venom... how?"

"Shh," he said, waving his hand to indicate this was of no consequence. "We still haven't figured that out. It seems that Fawkes, um, sent for someone, somehow, we don't know who he was, but he had some brilliant magic. His name was Peredhil."

"I don't know him. But somehow the name seems familiar."

Harry smiled. "I thought so too." He paused a moment. "You came for me."

Tura looked away with a cynical frown. "Someone had to."

"You *did*."

She pursed her lips, but there was no anger, just consternation. As much as he wanted to know her thoughts, Harry sat quietly and watched the expressions play over her face. She glanced at him a few times, seemingly trying to speak but unable to find the right words. Harry did nothing, said nothing; he would wait forever if need be.

A tentative hand stretched out from under her blanket. Biting his lip to hold back yet more tears, he held up his palm in offering and brought it just to the tips of her fingers. The contact lasted only seconds, but it was enough, a delicate reminder of graveyards and Forbidden Forests and tea shops. Harry could feel it in his bones: there was still a wide gulf between them, but the first step was taken.

Ondossi still remained in the Hospital Wing, and Lupin himself came to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Moody had been sent to negotiate with a group of vampires on the continent. "Fundamentally Slytherin types, vampires," commented Lupin after their first class, as he, Harry-and-Viktor, Ron, and Hermione sauntered down to lunch. "They've been watching both sides closely for some time, deciding who's most likely to win, for one thing, and also which one will give them a better deal. Refused to rush in and declare allegiance, unlike the werewolves." A note of defeat clouded his last word. "It seems they approved of the outcome with the giants, and it won them over. They insisted on meeting with Arthur Weasley and Alastor; they want to *parlez* with the Ministry more so than the Order. Apparently one of their "terms of allegiance" is to be taken off the list of 'magical creatures' and be recognized as sentient beings in their own right."

"Imagine that," said Hermione sarcastically. "Why, next thing you know, house-elves will want the same privilege."

The boys painfully stifled the urge to roll their eyes, but Lupin turned to address her with a bright smile. "I think all these centuries of brainwashing will take a bit longer to wear off, but when they're ready, Hermione, I think you'll be on that committee."

"Oh!" she said, halting briefly in the corridor as she stared, wide-eyed, after Lupin. When she recovered and dashed to catch up to the group, she beamed as though she'd just won 500 points for Gryffindor.

Lupin came into the Hospital Wing that evening with a hangdog expression, apparently wanting to apologize properly to Ondossi. She cut him off before he said a word, however. "Don't be silly. A wolf's gotta do what a wolf's gotta do. However," she chastened, "I'd like to know why you're not taking Wolfsbane." She wagged a reprimanding finger.

Lupin hung his head meekly. "Simply put, there's no one left in the UK that can make it. Greyback either murdered or frightened away the few Potions Masters that were supplying it; Severus Snape was the last one actually brewing the stuff the past two years." His fists clenched, an uncharacteristic gesture. "I gather that, while he was making it for me, he actually had a full-scale production going on the side... Anyway, Professor Slughorn never quite mastered it, and no one on the continent will set foot here, for fear Greyback will target them."

Ondossi stared at him, brow furrowed in disbelief, throughout his explanation. "Well, that's the lamest thing I ever heard," she said. "Buncha cowards! Well, you should have said something, alpha-boy: I can brew Wolfsbane. Heaven knows I just drip with spare time," she added with a surly scowl, but her face quickly softened. "But I don't mind, Remus. You shouldn't have to become something you despise every month." She squeezed his hand.

Lupin was taken aback. "I didn't know you were a Potions Master," he said.

"You never asked. Besides, I'm not; it's just a hobby. An Inupiaq thing," she said, giving Harry a conspiratorial smirk.

Two days later, Ondossi showed up for supper in the Great Hall and announced that Madam Pomfrey had finally released her. Lupin's face lit up with relief when he spotted her, and he leapt to his feet and ushered her into the private room behind the staff table. To Harry's surprise, Lupin stopped in the doorway and beckoned to him to come join them.

"I need to get back to Headquarters now that you're on your feet," Lupin said briskly to Ondossi, as she scratched the ears of the house-elf who brought her a plate of food. "But before I go, I want to know what you learned from Draco Malfoy."

Ondossi winced as she sat down to her dinner, but she hid it immediately and turned to Harry. "You haven't told them yet?" she asked, pressing her hands against her sides as though holding her belly together.

"Told them what?" he sputtered, wondering uneasily if she was truly fit enough to be out of the Hospital Wing. "That Draco and Snape went on the run, taking weird Portkeys and Muggle transportation for two days until Draco had no earthly idea where they were? After which they finally Apparated to the middle of absolutely nowhere and proceeded to hike for a week to Voldemort's hideaway? There's nothing to tell!"

Ondossi shook her head impatiently. "Harry, Harry, Harry. You need to pay more attention!" She turned to Lupin. "I'm with him on the first part; the first few days they went literally all over the world. And there's definitely something strange about the Portkeys they're using; they feel more like being popped like popcorn than squeezed through the old space-time continuum." She glanced at Harry, who raised a thumb in agreement with her description.

"But once they got down to business with the hike... Harry, you're the Auror Wanna-Be, you tell me: Surely you noticed things about their surroundings?"

Harry stared a moment, then spread his hands as though perhaps the gods might smile upon him and drop the answer into them. "It was utterly, utterly barren. I never saw another living person, or a road, or even a piece of litter!"

"Okay, that was good. Except for the 'barren' part. Tundra or desert are barren. The land you saw was forest. Right?"

"Yeah," he said. "But barren as in devoid of people."

"Not the same thing," she countered. "Forests go a long way toward hiding people, houses, roads--both the sights and the sounds. You could walk right through someone's backyard and not even realize it. But the population was sparse--I never heard any airplanes buzzing overhead, or mechanical sounds. So we know he's hiding in the wilderness, not a city. What else?" She stopped talking and took a bite of her dinner.

"The mosquitoes were outrageous," Harry finally managed.

Tura laughed. "Agreed. Think, Harry. What did you notice about the sun?"

Harry frowned. "The sun? What about it? It was there... what more can be said?"

"Just this: Didn't you notice they made camp before sunset every day and got moving after sunrise--yet they hiked a long time?"

Both Harry and Lupin sat bolt upright. "They were in the far north!"

"Bing," she said, tapping her nose. "They can't be much further south than 60 degrees latitude. But they also can't be north of the Arctic Circle, because they're in the taiga. Forest, not tundra. The longitude will be the tricky part, as usual."

Lupin stood up and began to pace before the fireplace. "It's premature to say so, but I don't think he's in North America. No offense, Miss Ondossi, but Voldemort seems to distinctly favor this side of the Atlantic."

"None taken," she said. "Besides, I agree--the trees weren't right. The larches weren't... larchy enough."

"I'll have to mention that in my summary," Lupin drawled, winking at Harry. "Now all we have to do is search the whole of Siberia."

"Don't forget Finland, too," Ondossi said with a wry face. "But first let me call on Mr. Malfoy again. I want to take a good look at the flora and fauna. We might be able to narrow it down if he spotted any indigenous species."

Harry's stomach tightened uncomfortably and he really wanted to protest this plan, but he couldn't come up with a single logical reason. "Maybe take Neville with you when you go," he suggested, hoping he didn't sound as jealous as he felt. "He's just crackers about plants."

She gazed at him with a crinkled brow for a moment, then nodded. "Neville Longbottom," she said thoughtfully. "I might just do that."

Lupin and Ondossi left soon afterward, however, and Harry heard nothing more about the matter until the weekend. A school owl similar to Ron's Pigwidgeon in both size and temperament brought him a note from Ondossi, inviting him, Ron, and Hermione to meet her on Saturday after the Slytherin / Ravenclaw Quidditch match. They broke off from the crowd heading out of the stadium and trooped through the slushy snow to Hagrid's cabin.

Hagrid welcomed them in and took their cloaks with his usual jovial bustling. Tura, Sirius, and Lupin were already inside, dwarfed by Hagrid's enormous chairs. Armed with a cup of burnt tea the size of a Quaffle, Harry climbed up to sit beside Sirius; the chairs were easily wide enough to share comfortably. He clenched his jaw as Ondossi absentmindedly extended a hand to Viktor Krum and pulled him up, then felt particularly foolish when Viktor promptly boosted Hermione up to settle in between them.

Tura ignored the jostling, her fingers laced anxiously in her lap. "I went a couple rounds with Draco Malfoy," she began bluntly when the room was quiet again. "He saw a lot of things. I think I know where to go."

"Talk to us," said Sirius, leaning forward and gripping the huge armrest.

"The Enisei River cuts north through Siberia and divides it into a European side and an Asian side. Draco spotted whole herds of musk deer--they live on the Asian side, the east side. There were also some Siberian robins; they're blue on top, white on the bottom, very distinctive. They're also East Side dwellers. And the only crows I saw were the regular black kind, not the hooded crows of Europe."

She set her jaw and scooted to the edge of the chair. "I went home this morning and talked to some people about the land Draco saw. At home, there are people who've traveled--gone west across the Bering Strait to trade with the Chuchki and Yupik. The Russians don't like people coming from 'our country' into 'their country,' as if we haven't been doing it for thousands of years. So we can't use sleds on the ice anymore. Now we only go by boat, in the summertime--and if there's an early winter, people can get stuck there until spring.

"I talked to some traders who have spent time over there. The lowlands in the Far East have bogs and marshes. But traders who've gone further inland say the land changes after the Lena River. The land becomes more dry, mostly forest and rivers instead of bogs. That was the kind of land that Draco went through.

"When I looked in their minds, I didn't see any places I recognized from Draco's journey, but it looked right. We'll find the Dark Lord somewhere in Evenk country, in central Siberia."

Lupin gazed at her thoughtfully, but Sirius folded his arms and leaned forward. "You sound rather confident for someone who didn't see a single landmark," he drawled suspiciously.

Ondossi's voice dropped into a growl. "Draco spent over a week walking through those forests. I saw enough."

Harry predicted an approaching battle and rested a hand on his godfather's elbow. "She perceives the, ah, landscape differently than we do, Sirius," he said, unsure of how to explain what he meant. His forays into Tura's thoughts had illuminated a whole new culture, in which the terrain, sun, and stars mattered more than maps and directions, when it came to finding one's way around. He glanced at Tura, who looked both surprised and flattered. *See? he projected. I HAVE been paying attention.*

"Assuming you're correct, Professor," said Lupin, "we're still talking about hundreds of square miles to search, correct?"

"Thousands," she corrected. "But it's not all that bad. Draco was forced to hike through the wilderness for over a week, because the Dark Lord had wards against Apparation. I'm guessing they hiked at least seventy miles as the broomstick flies. So if we assume that his camp is at the center of those wards--"

Hermione, who had been staring with increasing interest at Ondossi, finished the thought. "We're looking for a circle more than a hundred miles across where no one can Apparate!" Tura nodded, while Viktor gently tried to pry his hand from Hermione's grip, as she was crushing it in her excitement.

Sirius sat back in the chair with a feral grin. "Now that's more like it. A target that size we can manage! Though we'll have to be cautious; he'll probably know if we encounter his wards. We'll have to send out scouts to detect the magic, rather than just Apparate around until we bounce off."

Lupin snorted. "*If we bounce, and not simply incinerate.*"

Hagrid had been taking in the conversation with wide-eyed wonder, and he jumped up from his chair and made the floor tremble. "Well, tha' settles it, then! Les' get started!" He was clearly ready to be in Siberia before sunset.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there, big fella," Tura said warmly. "Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it, remember? No one's ever won a war by crossing the Russian steppes in wintertime, magic or no!"

*Not to mention the Horcruxes*, thought Harry. He sighed and sank back in the chair, though the seat was so large, he nearly laid out flat before reaching the backrest. "But we can't just sit around; we have to do *something!*" he grumbled.

"We will, Harry, we will," said Remus firmly. "We'll set some teams out to search for the warded space, map out the terrain, and so on. Tura's right; if we truly have to march upon Voldemort's fortress, we'll have to wait until spring. But the hunt will start tonight!"

There was a fleeting moment of silence, then Hagrid's hut erupted in cheers.

Seconds later, however, Harry began to fidget and wring his hands. "It's too soon," he finally declared out of the blue, interrupting Lupin as he and Sirius conferred about the scouting teams. Everyone swung their heads to look at him.

"Finding Voldemort," Harry explained. "We're not ready. And not because we don't have all the Horcruxes, either. There's someone in the Ministry who's been helping him from the very beginning. Someone very good at hiding their tracks. Once Voldemort's gone they'll never be caught, you can count on it!"

Hermione frowned. "If they don't simply take his place!" she agreed. "Whoever it is, he's already got one up on Voldemort, knowing that Harry's not an Horcrux."

Ron, who had been staring at the floor for much of the conversation, looked up with a stern expression. "Then maybe it's time to flush him out."

Now all the heads swung toward Ron, bearing dubious looks. "No, I'm serious!" he said. "I'm with Harry; this one in the Ministry's as bad as You-Kn--Voldemort! We can't let him slip away. I reckon he's been sitting and waiting for the final battle. He knows that if Harry wins, Voldemort will really be dead, because Harry's not his Horcrux anymore. That means he can rally all those Death Eaters *he* freed from Azkaban, plus pull any other strings he's set in the Ministry, Gringotts, wherever. Whoever he is, he's high up enough to create all sorts of chaos once he knows Voldemort's out of the way--giving him a perfect chance to take over.

"And even if Voldemort beats Harry, the traitor can still take advantage," continued Ron. "He knows Voldemort wants to recover that bit of his soul from Harry before killing him. But Voldemort *doesn't* know, of course, that the soul was destroyed already. What better time for the traitor to strike at Voldemort, when he's all heady with victory but hasn't yet discovered that he's mortal again?"

Hagrid crossed his eyes. "Tha' was clear as mud."

"The point is, the traitor's no dummy," said Sirius. "And he hasn't been helping Voldemort all these years out of a generous nature. He has plans, that one. Ron's right; he never told his master that Harry's Horcrux was destroyed. He's setting Voldemort up to become mortal again without realizing it, so that he can make his move."

At that point, Ondossi threw her hands in the air. "What difference does it make? You think he's the only one after the throne? You can bet there's traitors in high places the whole world over, each one planning and scheming and biding their time. And they'll all just keep on sleazing after the Dark Lord's dead. So what if this one gets away too?"

"Because *this one* betrayed my parents," snarled Harry, as Sirius, beside him, growled, "*This one* put me in Azkaban." The two of them looked at one another, then turned to face the group with unshaking solidarity. *This one* had messed with the wrong wizards.

The next few weeks passed at a crawl. Harry watched every morning for an owl from Headquarters, and waited beside the Gryffindor fireplace long after midnight every night, awaiting news about the search for Voldemort's camp. His nerves were frayed, knowing that at any day his time would come. He would set out with the rest of the Order to march to the final showdown. Once again he found it impossible to focus on his classes, spending most of his time alone in the Room of Requirement reading about defensive spells or practicing them with Viktor.

Harry became more and more proficient at projecting words into others' minds, until it became as effortless as talking. He still required eye contact to read the thoughts of others, which vexed him to no end. As the spring holidays approached, he lingered after Ondossi's class and asked very politely if they might work on Legilimency lessons while school was out.

Tura gnawed on her lower lip before answering. "Of course," she finally said, though she sounded far less certain than the words implied. "That's what I'm here for, after all. Of course."

She was still afraid of him. Taking a half-step backward, Harry lowered his eyes and said quietly, "We could use the classroom on the first floor, right next to the Great Hall." *There'll be plenty of people around to protect you.*

She studied him a moment, still worrying her lip. "That'll be fine. Right after breakfast Saturday morning?"

"I'll be there, Professor. Thank you." Harry turned on his heel, forcing himself not to sprint out of the room. Sirius's words rang in his head: *Let your actions remind her that you're a good man.*



That Saturday, he arrived at the Great Hall as soon as it opened for breakfast, and when Ondossi finished her meal, he walked down the center of the room and asked rather loudly if she was ready for lessons. She furrowed her brows in surprise, glancing beyond him at the many curious faces. Understanding dawned in her eyes and she nodded at him slowly. "Let's go, falling star," she said drily, and rose to take his arm, letting him escort her from the Great Hall like a colleague.

With Viktor perched outside the classroom door in his usual fashion, Harry sat crosslegged on the floor across from Tura. They had always sat this way, it being convenient for eye contact *and* for falling over from numbness. He recalled their previous summer, the two of them spending countless hours together in the empty dungeon. *That was before I became a monster*, he thought miserably. He wondered how he'd failed to notice during all that time that their knees were almost touching, or that he was close enough to hear her breath.

"What will we work on today, Harry?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "I'm doing well with projecting my thoughts, but nothing new has happened lately."

"We worked on projection at Christmas time," she said, frowning. Harry shrugged and nodded. "And you haven't noticed any new magic since then?"

"None," he replied, somewhat startled to realize that over three months had passed since the last time his magic expanded. Tura looked somewhat alarmed by the news, but to Harry, it seemed quite appropriate. "I've, uh, been rather down lately," he noted.

Tura stared at him. "You have, haven't you?"

"No blame intended," he added hastily.

As she continued to stare, her features softened and her eyes grew misty. "This is silly," she finally said. "You can't be this upset on account of... me. I mean... Geez, Harry, if *things* hadn't gone sour between us, you'd probably be sick of me by now!"

Harry shook his head slowly. "You've been in my mind, Tura," he finally said. "You know that's not true."

She hunched awkwardly. "Not lately I haven't," she corrected, but her tone was glum and she began to squirm a little.

Using his most delicate trace of Legilimency, Harry looked within her and responded to her hidden thoughts. "Yes you are," he said aloud.

She froze and eyed him suspiciously. "What did you say?"

He felt a small surge of pride; this was the first time he'd ever touched her mind without her notice. "I said yes, you *are* worth it."

Her arms fell into her lap, nearly accompanied by her jaw. She cleared her throat. "Well, even with nothing new, you've certainly improved."

She was dodging behind the professor-student screen, and Harry wasn't going to let her. "Why do you do this, Tura?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice calm and gentle. "Why do you insist that I don't really love you?"

*That* broke the surface. Tura stared at a joint in the flagstone floor for some time. "I never told you why my father murdered my mother," she began. "He wanted a boy. A *spare*. In case he was ever murdered. He had only the one Horcrux at that point, the diary. He figured that if he had a son, he could take the soul out of the diary and put it in a fresh new body that would be almost as good as his original. Or he could have a nice young, healthy body hidden away on the tundra, for when the one he had got too old.

"I've heard stories from my people, about how he courted my mom like a perfect gentleman. They knew about the wizards and their city, but there hadn't been a known sorcerer among the Inupiat in generations. So they didn't know anything about him being evil--they weren't into wizard politics. And he was handsome and charismatic, with many years of practice at manipulating people."

She sighed, but continued to speak to the floor. "But he fed my mom potions to destroy my soul, Harry. He wanted me to be born as an empty vessel that he could pour his own soul into whenever he wanted. My mom took the first one and knew something was wrong. She got scared. She and the *afatkuq* worked together with the Earth to make the other potions disappear, but *look* like she took them. Defying Voldemort right to his face--my mother was a brave woman.

"Well. He came back two years after I was born, expecting to find a little boy, the spitting image of himself but without a mind of its own. Instead there was a feisty little girl. He lashed out at my mom, but I still don't know why he spared me. Maybe it was beneath him to waste a *Kedavra* on a baby, or he figured I'd never survive alone anyway, I don't know."

"Perhaps he thought to make you his queen someday," Harry added hesitantly.

Tura looked up at him, wide-eyed. "Mother of Merlin! You think he..." Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, now that's just *nasty*!" They stared at each other a moment, each one feeling a bit queasy. Tura cleared her throat. "Well, I suppose that's one way to keep it in the family," she muttered weakly.

Harry shook his head with a humorless smile. "Ten years later, he stood over my mother's body and cast the *Kedavra* at me. He didn't want to make the same mistake twice, you think?"

She, too, smiled grimly. "Taught him a thing or two, didn't we?"

It was strange, recognizing this terrible experience that they held in common, and Harry instinctively reached for her hands. He stopped himself short of touching her, as alarm flickered through her eyes. He raised both hands, palms forward in surrender, and sat back contritely. "I'm sorry. Sorry."

She steeled herself with an angry sniff. "For Pete's sake, Harry. I just told you: my father used Dark magic to steal the color from my eyes before I was even born. Who knows what else in me was destroyed? I'm *damaged goods*."

"Don't say that!" Harry barked, barely remembering to keep his hands at his sides. "For all your talk, what about this?" He shoved his hair back to reveal the scar on his forehead. "He left a mark on me as well, Tura. Am I 'damaged goods,' then? Am I?"

For a moment she simply gaped at him. "Of course not," she finally stammered.

"You sound so sure," he said reprovingly. "But he made me an Horcrux, without even being fully prepared. If you're damaged goods, then I must be as well."

"It's not a contest, you big dork," she said sourly, peering once again at the floor.

Harry smirked. "Of course not. It's bloody ridiculous, is what it is." He straightened his spine, studying her intently. A witch of awesome magic, slumping on the floor like a forlorn waif. He understood for the first time that beneath the tough exterior, she felt broken and unclean inside. He extended his hand very slowly, placing one fingertip under her chin to raise her eyes to his. *You're not damaged, Tura. You're whole*. Aloud, he said, "Don't let him steal your life away. He doesn't deserve that much power."

When her tears began to spill, Harry gathered her in his arms and held on very loosely until they were spent.

## 38: The Darkest Secret

Chapter 38 of 50

Determined to identify the traitor in the Ministry, Harry attempts a drastic measure, with shocking results.

"So did you snog her?"

Hermione punched him on the arm. "RON!" she bellowed, turning the "o" into three distinct syllables. "Don't mind him, Harry," she said, glowering at Ron as though daring him to say another word. Naturally, as soon as she looked away, Ron's freckled face lit up with mischief, and he wagged his eyebrows imploringly.

Harry simply shook his head, hoping the warmth in his face stemmed from the brisk London air, and not from blushing. "No snogging," he mumbled a bit sheepishly, then added, "Though that's not what I hear about you and Luna Lovegood."

Ron's grin turned a tad sharper. "Ah-ah-ah, this is a You thing, not a Me thing," he chided, though his smile revealed that Harry had struck close to the mark. Ron elbowed him as they walked along. "Besides, you ought to, Harry. I've got a feeling about you two."

Hermione threw her hands in the air, exasperated. "I should think so, too, Ron, seeing as everyone else has known about them since Christmas! But she's a professor, for goodness sake; it wouldn't be proper until the term's over." She turned back to Harry with a warm, indulgent smile. "It's sweet, Harry, that you're so kind and patient with her. She needs that."

Hermione's praises only reminded Harry how little he deserved them. He shrugged and began searching for a new topic. Luckily, they were nearly at their destination: the Visitor's Entrance for the Ministry of Magic.

Harry-and-Viktor, Ron, and Hermione made their way to Level One, where Percy met them at the elevator. The reception witch gave Viktor a smile cold enough to freeze time as they passed her desk. No one said a word until they were locked, warded, and otherwise ensconced in Percy's office, which was strewn with even more paper than before. Percy looked tired but cheery, and he hugged Ron's shoulders playfully when he finished setting the silencing spells on the door.

"Nice of you to visit. Are you down here for the holidays?"

"Just today," said Ron. "Harry's got lessons with Ondossi all week." He leered, which made Hermione scowl and Harry briefly consider wringing his neck. Percy was, as usual, completely oblivious to the entire exchange and only nodded distractedly.

"How's the work?" Harry asked him.

Percy flopped into his chair, but with an air of well-deserved relaxation rather than defeat. "That depends on which project you mean. The Azkaban/traitor business is easy to summarize: dead end. I only hope that if I ever commit a crime, I cover it up half as well as this bloke. Father decided to continue to play ignorant; last month's food shipment was sent to Azkaban as if nothing was wrong, and it disappeared without so much as a trail of bread crumbs." Percy shook his head, seemingly disapproving of this course of action, but showing a new level of diplomacy by keeping his opinion to himself.

"Then there's Black, which was of course the original point of this inquest. I can state unequivocally that not a single shred of evidence remains that Black killed Peter Pettigrew. We also have proof that prior evidence was removed from storage, in a way that suggests a deliberate attempt to obscure the facts. This raises doubts about the validity of the previous trial. And since you and others have deposed that Peter Pettigrew is, in fact, still alive, that rather implies that the primary murder for which Black was convicted never actually occurred in the first place! I haven't studied to enter the Wizengamot, but from what little I know of wizard law, if Black were to receive a retrial, he could not be convicted of any crime."

Percy leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. "My report will therefore conclude that if Black were alive, he could successfully demand a retrial by the Wizengamot. Furthermore, if he were to do so, he would certainly be deemed innocent of the murder of Peter Pettigrew. Assuming, of course, that your testimony wouldn't change under a Binding Oath in the Wizengamot."

Passion blazed in Harry's eyes. "It wouldn't. Pettigrew's alive."

Percy nodded. "Just so. I only have to write the formal documents for Father and that aspect of the inquest is closed. Such a travesty, that Black was imprisoned that way. He was no older than I am when they took him to Azkaban! Yet it's little comfort to him now, rest his soul. A bit late to exonerate the poor chap, but perhaps it'll lead to some justice reforms."

"Yeah, well, good work is its own reward, Percy," said Harry, hoping he could be the first to tell Sirius the news.

"And then there's this odd business with the imposter Baby Who Lived. I think I know where the baby came from, but I can't be sure. And of course, the traitor covered his tracks perfectly once again; it didn't lead me anywhere on that trail. But it's all inconclusive, I'm afraid, there's only--"

Harry interrupted him, leaning over the desk. "What *did* you find?"

For a moment, Percy made an indignant face and seemed on the verge of telling Harry just where he could go with his nosy questions. But one benefit of being a Legilimagus (indeed, one which Harry enjoyed profoundly) was that no one seemed able to stare him down anymore. With a nervous gulp, Percy's haughty look disappeared, and he found a new fascination with his coffee mug.

"Mind, Harry, this is mostly conjecture," he muttered uneasily. "I had Tonks investigate all the seventh-year students at Hogwarts. It stood to reason; the traitor would probably choose a wizard baby, and close to you in age. There were no reports of a missing child, as I told you before, but I told Tonks to look for anything strange or suspicious around that time. She went down to Mysteries and had the divination geeks run a pattern analysis of that whole week.

"Obviously, the death of a Dark wizard by his own curse affected all the magical harmonics of that period, but Tonks apparently has a friend among the house-elves up at Hogwarts. It stole some hair for her, from every male student in your class." Percy stopped to shake his head and grin. "Resourceful girl, really. Anyway, that allowed the divvies to 'narrow the band' or something; only they understand that mumbo-jumbo. The net result being that they were able to identify magical anomalies around but a handful of boys at that time."

Percy sighed and looked up at Harry again. "You have to understand, though, nothing's set in stone here. I could only track down concrete evidence on *one* anomaly. There are three other boys with evidence of unusual magic during that week that I couldn't trace. Even though the one I *did* trace *is* suspicious, it's by no means conclusive. The other boys--"

"Fine, we get it: it's only a hunch," interrupted Ron. "Who was it, already?"

Percy looked like he wanted to make a rude gesture at his little brother, but he took a deep breath and continued. "Very well. It was Neville Longbottom."

An uncomfortable twist seemed to pass through Harry's throat. He swallowed hard to clear it, then asked, "And what was the evidence you found?"

More comfortable discussing data and facts, Percy rummaged on his desk and pulled a small pile of parchments from beneath some scrolls. "Just this: Neville's parents were Aurors. Neither of them showed up for work on November 1 or 2, 1981." He handed Harry a yellowed Ministry payroll sheet from Gringott's. One of the columns beside the list of names was titled "Absences, Unpaid;" many names had a tiny "11/1" scratched into that column. A few, including the Longbottoms, also had "11/2" penned beside it.

"I noted, however, that this was their first unpaid leave in the six years they'd been employed as Aurors," he continued, flipping through the rest of the parchments as if proving to Harry that he had researched this statement. "They had other absences, but each one was accompanied by a notation from the MLE secretary--they weren't the type who simply didn't show up for work without an explanation. To disappear two days in a row without so much as a 'we celebrated a bit too much' seems most odd to me. Particularly since very few Aurors skived either of those days--the entire department wanted to round up the Death Eaters before they had time to regroup after You-Know-Who's death." He picked through the parchments again, to flash a piece with the Law Enforcement heraldry printed at the top, though he set the whole pile down again before Harry could look at it.

"I can't ask the Longbottoms, obviously, what they were doing for two days, but I did speak to two of their old colleagues. One recalled only that the Longbottoms had seemed a bit out of sorts, but he'd assumed they'd had a bit too much Firewhisky the day before. The other remembered that they kept insisting it was Tuesday, not Wednesday, when they--"

Harry leapt to his feet, startling Percy into silence. "That's it," he said, turning quickly to Ron and Hermione. Ron nodded vigorously, and though furrowed her brows, she, too, nodded. "That's the traitor's M.O." he growled for Percy's benefit. "Cuts out the memories so clean, it's as though the day never happened. He must have stolen away Neville that night and taken him to the Ministry, but when your--uh, *employee* complained that it wasn't me, they just slipped Neville back home and Obliviated his parents. He probably meant to murder them to cover the whole thing up, but didn't have time before the hoax was revealed."

Hermione let out a small yelp, muffled by her hand, which she'd thrown over her mouth in shock. Harry lowered his voice in concern at her obvious alarm. "What is it?"

"Harry! Death Eaters captured and tortured Neville's parents soon after that happened! They said they were looking for Voldemort, but maybe they were looking for the traitor themselves! But more importantly, Memory Charms need time to heal; we just studied it in Arithmancy! Erasing a memory, particularly without replacing it, stuns the parts of the brain that create long-term memories. If they were put under the Imperius curse that soon after a two-day Obliviation... Oh, Harry, that may be why they cracked under torture!"

Ron, Percy, and Viktor all leapt to their feet as well. "She is right," said Viktor. "Lunacy is well-known effect of Imperius too soon after Obliviation. Longbottoms were doomed if traitor had done this."

Harry stood clenching his fists for some time before speaking, and when he did, his voice was deep and cold. "This guy better hope the Aurors find him before I do."

Harry's mood was not improved when he arrived at Grimmauld Place, only to discover that Sirius had been dispatched to the Siberian wilderness to hunt for Voldemort's hidden enclave. "Come now, can you think of a more perfect job for him?" Lupin had said. "Out of the house, and not a soul around to recognize him. And you're lucky--you can send him some post, your owl won't attract attention."

Harry grudgingly accepted that Sirius was much better off bounding through the snow on Order business, but he returned to Hogwarts in a brooding funk. He stomped down to the dungeons and found Ondossi in a similar mood, snarling over a cauldron in the Potions laboratory. The door was ajar; she looked up at him when he pushed it open.

"Hey," she said, returning immediately to her stirring. "I thought you were in London."

"I was. Sirius is in Siberia. I came back early."

"Okay. Sit a minute and don't bug me. This is Wolfsbane; I'm almost done."

Harry sunk into what he took for a beanbag chair, but was actually a pile of furs. They were soft and warm but not particularly comfortable. He nearly asked if Tura had something against chairs, but the look of irritable concentration on her face dissuaded him. He finally spread them out in a thick mat and laid upon them flat on his back, staring at a collection of cobwebs on the ceiling. A steady, quiet stream of Inupiaq words issued from the lab bench, then finally stopped.

"Make yourself at home, why don't ya?" said Tura, nudging his ribs with her bare toes.

"Don't mind if I do," he said, arching away from the cold foot to make some more room on the fur mat. She sat beside him, wriggling her toes into the fur. "This is the seal you killed, isn't it?"

"*Gussuk*," she smirked. "That was years ago. This one's totally different."

Harry raised himself on his elbows and appraised the fur. It looked like a big silvery mass, just like the seal in her memory. "Whatever you say," he shrugged. "Look, I've been thinking."

"Congratulations" she deadpanned. Her sauciness made him want to catch her by the shoulders and tickle her without mercy amongst the furs; the fact that he didn't dare raise even a finger toward her only made his mood worse.

Sighing, he sat up. "I talked to Percy Weasley this morning. He's going to exonerate Sirius in his report. But he also turned up something new about the Ministry traitor: that he's probably responsible for Neville's parents. He Obliviated them, which left them vulnerable to torture."

The impish spark left her eyes. "Another reason you can't let this one get away. I see. Well?"

"So it occurred to me today that there's someone who's never been questioned properly, who might have some answers about this traitor."

She peered at him skeptically. "And this is...?"

"Myself."

"Come again?" said Tura.

"Me. I was there, that night when my parents were killed. I remember parts of it. Who knows what else I might have seen? I need you, Tura, to help me remember. To come into my mind."

She stood up and headed for the lab bench. Harry started to protest, but she raised her hand for silence and began adding ingredients to the cauldron. She stirred it a moment, then returned with a dark scowl.

"You're talking about serious Legilimency, Harry. The kind that borders on Dark magic. Digging out ancient and repressed memories is *just* what you do to drive someone mad. Should I remind you that when the Dark Lord stirred up those memories of yours, you got a little unhinged? So much that you fell into a trap and nearly killed the

pooch? Bad idea, hotshot. I won't do it."

"What do you mean, you won't? I don't think it's your decision, Tura."

"No?" she squawked. "I think I'm in charge of what I do with my magic, bucko."

"You also vowed to defeat Voldemort. This might be the most important step you'll ever take. I'm doing this, Tura. If you won't help me, then I'm going to use the Pensieve, but it'll be easier if--"

"A Pensieve?" she interrupted. "Are you crazy? Those are dangerous, not to mention they don't work!"

Harry straightened his spine. "What do you mean? Dumbledore's works; I've used it myself. It's almost better than Legilimency! Anyone can join you in the memory, and it looks like you're standing right there."

Ondossi rolled her eyes. "Look, hotshot, even assuming there really is a working Pensieve, it can only display what the observer took in. It can't just create something out of nothing. You were *asleep* in your crib until the very end. You didn't even see the *car*, let alone who was driving. If we put your memory in the bowl, all we'll see is the ceiling light up green, and then collapse."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but he realized she was probably right. It made sense--if he hadn't seen it himself, however briefly, how could the Pensieve possibly reconstruct it? "We should still try," he insisted. "The driver came in to recover the body--maybe I caught a glimpse of him at some point!"

With an angry huff, Ondossi returned again to the lab bench. She stirred the Wolfsbane as she spoke. "Harry, this obsessive streak of yours is really starting to annoy me. You listen to me now. Lupin's going to be here in a few hours to take his potion. We'll explain it to him and see what *he* says."

Harry considered for a moment. "And if he sides with me, you agree to help?"

"If he sides with you, I'm going to make this the nastiest-tasting potion he's ever taken, but yeah, I'll help. And only to keep you out of trouble--I'm not gonna help you hurt yourself. You're plenty good at that without me along."

Lupin came into the Great Hall just as supper began, bringing Mad-eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt with him. Harry followed them to the staff table, glaring at Ondossi, who stuck out her chin defiantly. "Forewarned, then?" he said when he caught up.

Moody twisted his scarred face in what was clearly meant as a smirk. "An' forearmed. But I side with you on this score, Potter; Dumbledore's Pensieve is safe and sound, I'm sure of it."

Ondossi waved her hand impatiently. "Oh, come on. His little baby bed was underneath a ton of rubble." She reached over and, using her fingers like a comb, lifted away the hair flopped over Harry's scar. "Even if you didn't get knocked cold when you got *this*, you couldn't see diddly."

Hagrid, who had followed the conversation over a goblet of pumpkin juice the size of a garbage bin, nodded. "She's right, yeh know. Yeh wern' even cryin' when I got there, not 'til after I'd traced the path lef' from haulin' the body. An' you were buried unner part of the roof. Yeh din' see nothin,' Harry."

"But you don't know!" Harry nearly shouted. "There may have been a little gap that I peeked through... all I needed was a glimpse! I just want to try it. What's the harm in trying?"

They all fell silent for a moment. Lupin stared at the tabletop, running a finger slowly over an irregularity in the surface. It didn't take a Legilimagus to understand the morose expression on his face: he had no desire to review Lily Potter's last moment in life.

"I really can't concentrate on this until I take that potion," he finally said. "Moonrise is in less than an hour."

Ondossi pushed back her chair immediately. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to bring it to my office, Professor," said McGonagall firmly, which earned her a scathing look from Tura. Harry had to smile; she obviously caught wind of her own defeat in this round. As she departed for the Potions laboratory, the rest of them climbed the marble stairs to the seventh floor.

Once Lupin had received his Wolfsbane, he was visibly calmer. "Much better, thank you, Madam Ondossi." He ignored Tura's bashful giggle at being addressed as "madam," and asked the Headmistress to bring out the Pensieve. "I also agree with Harry. Dumbledore told me about this Pensieve, and despite their bad reputation, he was quite certain this one works."

Tura clicked her teeth in exasperation and gave Harry a dirty look. *You're not the only one who can use a Floo, you know*, he projected, but instantly regretted using such a smug tone.

Moody had his wand in hand. "I can extract the memory from you, Potter, if you'll cooperate. But Missy'll do a better job of it, if *she'll* cooperate." He peered down what remained of his nose at Ondossi.

Tura was red in the face, and she glowered at everyone in turn. "Fine," she finally grumbled. "If you're all bent on dragging this up, I'll do it myself." Taking Harry's chin in her hand, she turned his head toward her. "Just promise not to let me blather afterwards, okay?"

Harry gave a nearly imperceptible nod, and she speared into his mind.

*There was a doggy, and the nice lady named Birdy who always smelled like dirt. The doggy was running away and barking at Birdy and she was trying to catch him. She fell down but she didn't get an owie. Then she couldn't get back up. He knew how that felt, he often fell down and needed help to find his feet again, but it was very funny to see a Grown-Up to do that. Then the little doggy turned into a very big black doggy, and it nudged her with its big nose and she was up again. That was funny, but scary too. Big things were scary if they weren't Mumma.*

*Dadda was talking. Dadda wasn't there before, but he must be nearby. Most words meant nothing to him, but the sounds registered in his mind nonetheless.*

*"Lily, take Harry and go. It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off--"*

*Birdy and the doggy were all gone and he was in his own bed. The sides were up and it was dark. In a wordless way, he reasoned through what that meant: that it was night-night still and he couldn't get out of his bed. His tummy wasn't hungry. His eyes felt heavy--it was hard to keep them open. He didn't really want to keep them open because there was nothing to see in the dark. They were only open because Dadda had talked so loud.*

*More sounds came and everything that was black turned white. The sounds meant that someone had come in his room, maybe Mumma or Dadda or maybe even Birdy was there with the doggy, but it was too bright now to see anything. The big, bright light on his ceiling was on, and it hurt his eyes.*

*It was Mumma. He wanted Mumma to pick him up and make his tired eyes feel better. She was going to pick him up. That was good. He put his face into her soft, squishy shoulder and it felt nice to close his eyes.*

*"Put that down and stand aside." He didn't know what that meant, and didn't care, now that Mumma was there. Mumma was shaking a lot, but he didn't mind, it felt nice to*

*jiggle when he was tired. Mumma petted his head and squeezed him and that felt nice too.*

*"I said stand aside, you silly girl. You needn't die as well."*

*Mumma's voice: "What?" She was squeezing him too hard, but he just wriggled, too tired to cry. She would stop, he knew it. Mumma would fix things and make him cozy again.*

*"I want the child. If you wish to live, stand aside now."*

*"No. Not Harry. Not Harry, please not Harry!"*

*"I will not be kept waiting. Set him down."*

*"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead ----- "*

*Laughter. "I just told you, girl, I have not come for you. You needn't die unless you insist. I want the boy. Set him down and stand aside, or I shall simply kill you both."*

*Mumma was shaking too much. It didn't feel nice anymore. Her face was all wet and cold.*

*"Not Harry! Not Harry! Have mercy...mercy... Please, I'll do anything! Not Har--"*

*"Petrificus Totalus." Mumma stopped shaking. That was good. He was so tired. Then there were more nice, warm hands taking him from Mumma and putting him back in his bed. Bed was cozy and warm too, and the yellow blanket was there to snuggle.*

*"I believe you would, girl." More laughter. "I'm not a monster, you know. I take no pleasure in killing without purpose. But I suppose I cannot let you go, or you'll surely hound my every step, right up to your dying breath. A pity."*

*Yellow blanket, then half-darkness, and his eyes no longer hurt. Sleepy.*

*"I could make you watch your baby die, lovely girl. I should, really, but I find that I have no desire to. I wish you no ill, my dear; I never have. But for the influence of that cur downstairs, you might have been my servant. Perhaps even my wife. I would have treasured you, you know. I would have given you my child." A heavy sigh. "But now there's nothing for it. Goodbye, Lily. Avada Kedavra!"*

*Even through his eyelids, he could see a bright green flash that made him jump, but then it was quiet again and he continued to drift off to sleep.*

*"Now for you, boy." Something small and cold touched his forehead, making his arms and legs bounce up from the bed. It wasn't nice to be startled like that. "Avada Kedavra." A blinding green flash, and the cold thing became a bad, bad owie, so bad he couldn't even cry, it was so wrong, so bad... and there was a sound, like laughing, and then it all went black.*

*Harry. Ondossi's voice, within him. Harry tried to open his eyes and failed. He couldn't find them. He had no eyes, no limbs, no body, as far as he could tell. "Am I dead?" he wondered soundlessly.*

*You are so paranoid! No, you're not dead. We're in a quiet part of your mind. Or mine. I'm not really sure anymore. It doesn't matter. I had to get us out of that memory.*

Harry could see why, and he was grateful that she'd pulled them out, though his thoughts were too scattered to express it properly. The memory had been disorienting in its intensity. There was more to it than he had ever recalled, even under a Dementor's influence, but he was certain it was all accurate. It felt utterly familiar, like seeing a room in old photograph and realizing he'd been there before, even though it was long forgotten.

"Let's go back, Tura. I need to see it again, now that the shock of it's passed. Help me--slow it down the way you did that time with Hagrid."

*No. You shouldn't see it again, Harry. Once was enough.*

"What are you talking about? I need *answers*. Come on! It's just a memory, Tura, it can't hurt anybody!"

*I said no! Put it in the Pensieve, Harry, and let the others see it.*

"That's what I wanted to do in the first place!" But there was no point in arguing; he felt her presence disappear and then he was standing in the Headmaster's office again. Ondossi was swaying slightly on her feet before him, her eyes rolled back in her head. He felt the cool tip of his wand touch his temple without any awareness of raising his arm to put it there. Harry understood immediately that she was still in his mind, guiding him through the spell to extract the memory. It was strange, a form of possession, but it was the quickest approach. Harry had watched others withdraw memories with their wands, but he had never learned how to do it.

It felt strange, as though hundreds of threads were being tugged throughout his head. The memory seemed to come from everywhere at once, as the threads yielded to the gentle pull of his wand and drew together into a strand. Then many strands came together into a rope, and so on, until the whole mass gently eased its way from the center of his head to the surface. As it touched the tip of his wand, Harry's stomach gave a sickening jolt. He recognized that the cool pressure against his forehead in the memory had been the tip of Voldemort's wand, just as his own wand was now resting inches from that same spot.

Harry expected some sort of snapping sensation as the last tendrils of the memory were sucked into the wand, but there was no such thing. Ondossi stepped back from him and promptly slumped to the floor, her head striking the Headmaster's desk with a sharp thunk that produced grimaces on every face in the room. Harry gulped, realizing he ought to have anticipated that. "Ooh, she'll feel that' later," said Hagrid sheepishly.

"We might as well leave her laying down for now. She'll just fall over if we try to sit her up," said Harry, tipping his wand over the Pensieve and letting the silver honey of his memory pour into it.

"Going for the Pensieve, then?" said Lupin.

"Yeah. She said to let everyone see it. She was right, I didn't see anything, just heard... I heard a lot." The memory had stretched to a monofilament, barely visible above the stone bowl, then broke off at last. When the very end of it finally sank into the Pensieve, Harry looked up and glanced at each of them in turn.

Shacklebolt stepped forward. "Why don't I go first?" Lupin and Hagrid both appeared relieved, though neither made a sound. He gave Harry a reassuring nod and both of them leaned down to the surface of the bowl.

Reliving the memory had been an awkward experience, but viewing it from an external vantage point was downright disorienting. He and Shacklebolt landed right in the middle of his dream, with dear old Birdie looming impossibly large over both of them. The dog, a spaniel, had the tail of a horse and threatened to knock them over as it bounded past.

Harry glanced apologetically at Shacklebolt, who shrugged. "Dream?" asked the Auror. Harry nodded. "Interesting. I've never seen a baby's dream. Well, except for my own, I suppose, but I was too young at the time to pay much atten--"

"Lily, take Harry and go. It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off--"

The dream in the Pensieve stuttered and dissipated, replaced by total darkness. Sounds roared around them, though, strange and eerie, with barely perceptible basso undertones. Feet pounding on stairs, recognizable by the rhythm and context. Baby Harry must have opened his eyes at that moment, as the crib suddenly snapped into view. Then there was movement; a shadow traversed the bright outline around the nursery door.

Both Harry and Shackbolt cringed when the light came on, but they adjusted to the sudden brightness much better than Baby Harry had. Lily ran to the baby and picked him up. She looked strange, as though reflected in some sort of fun-house mirror, large and distorted.

She picked up the baby and turned with a wild, terrified look in her eyes, but stopped short. Voldemort stood in the doorway. Harry realized that his father was already dead; one of those thumps earlier had been the sound of his body striking the floor. He suddenly felt lightheaded, but fortunately Shackbolt's arm was already about his shoulder. Harry leaned against the Auror's big frame, glad for the support.

Voldemort's appearance was even more warped than Lily's; the baby obviously never got a good look at him. He ordered Lily to stand aside. Though her eyes were wide with terror, she held her ground. The visuals faded again as Baby Harry set his head down on his mother's soft shoulder and dozed for a few seconds. Voldemort repeated his orders as Lily begged for Harry's life. Harry realized that he could hear her pulse in the background, pounding rapidly.

"Set him down and stand aside, or I shall simply kill you both." Lily was shaking so hard that the baby woke and raised his head, rooting instinctively against her cheek.

"Not Harry! Not Harry! Have mercy... mercy... Please, I'll do anything! Not Har--"

*"Petrificus Totalus."*

Lily went still, impossibly still. Voldemort plucked the baby from her arms without so much as glancing at him, but he set the infant down gently in the crib. He even pulled the little blanket over the child before turning back to Lily.

"Yes, I believe you would, girl," said Voldemort, then he chuckled ruefully. "I'm not a monster, you know." He raised his hand to Lily's face, brushing a tuft of hair back from her eyes as he continued his soliloquy.

Shackbolt tightened his grip on Harry as the visuals faded once again.

Voldemort made his comments and cast the curse, which produced a green flicker in the darkness. His boots creaked as he returned to the crib. "Now for you, boy." The visuals returned with a snap; Voldemort obviously woke the baby when he placed his cold wand on the little forehead. Voldemort's expression was flat; he looked downright bored. No anger, no passion, no vengeance--just taking care of one last bit of mundane business before calling it a night. Harry's whole body clenched with fury, that Voldemort regarded his life with such utter indifference.

As Voldemort uttered the curse, a familiar red/orange glow enveloped the baby like a second skin.

The green light of the curse had blinded the baby, so once again he and Shackbolt had no visuals. The laughter that had haunted his dreams so many times poured out once more, then everything went black and silent. Baby Harry had lost consciousness, and the memory was over. Harry didn't even have the satisfaction of watching Voldemort die.

Harry raised himself from the Pensieve first and fumbled backward a few steps. His knees felt rubbery. Hagrid saw how pale he had become and had the good sense to catch him and steer him into a chair.

Shackbolt looked a bit green as well, but his eyes were sharp and he spoke up quickly. "Nothing but Lily and You-Know-Who on visual. But there was someone else there."

All present lurched with shock at this statement, and Ondossi roused from her semi-comatose state to raise her arm and give a thumbs-up in Shackbolt's direction. "What?" Harry sputtered.

Shackbolt ran his hand over his bald pate, brushing away an invisible sheen of sweat. "That laughter. At the end. Someone had to be there, to laugh like that."

"That was Voldemort!" said Harry indignantly.

"No," replied the Auror. "He couldn't have. He was dead, remember? The curse had bounced off that... shield and killed him."

Harry stared at him, unable to speak. He'd heard that laugh in his dreams many times, and never had he once questioned that it was Voldemort. It had to be Voldemort; who else could it possibly be? Who but Voldemort would *laugh* under such circumstances? Any other suggestion was unthinkable.

And yet as soon as Voldemort cast the *Kedavra* curse at Harry, it had killed him. Or to be more precise, it killed Voldemort's physical body and cast out what was left of his soul. Either way, Voldemort could not laugh, any more than Cedric Diggory could have laughed after being struck down in that graveyard. Even if Voldemort had somehow managed to cling to his body for a few more seconds, he would not be in any mood to laugh. An outraged scream, perhaps a curse, but laughing at his own unexpected death? Not even Voldemort was *that* barmy.

"There *was* someone else there," Harry finally rasped.

Except for Ondossi and Shackbolt, everyone in the room leapt to their feet and pressed against the Pensieve. "Hold on, now, don't everyone dunk in there at once!" shouted Lupin. As people's backs straightened, Lupin shook his head. "Give over, now; where's Moody?"

"Back here," said the grizzled old Auror from the corner of the room. "Figured I'd let everyone rush in and get their concussions, then I'd have a clear shot." Despite the circumstances, several people laughed; had Lupin waited another breath before calling a halt, their heads would surely have collided as they formed an unintentional human pyramid over the Pensieve.

Moody's wooden leg clunked on the flagstones as he crossed the room, and he beckoned to Harry. The two of them exchanged a determined nod as they stood over the bowl, then plunged into its depths at the same time. Moody tipped his head immediately and said, "Dream." *He must have more experience at Legilimency than Kingsley does*, mused Harry.

They sat through the memory together, Moody scowling in concentrating during the visual parts. The mad eye spun wildly during the laughter at the end. "Let's give it another go," he said when the Pensieve went silent. "Only got my bearings this first time round."

Harry didn't know how to restart the memory and assumed they had to come up for air, but Moody caught him by the shoulder. "Just give it a minute, it'll start from the beginning... There we are." The dream took shape again, Birdie and the spaniel towering overhead once more.

This time Moody ignored the drama unfolding by the crib, prowling intently along the periphery of the room. He stopped with a scowl and scratched his chin, then stepped out into the hallway. Apparently that didn't satisfy him, as his frown became even more pronounced and he stomped back in, walking straight through Voldemort as he set Baby Harry back in the crib. "I wonder," Moody grumbled thoughtfully, then held very still.

The green light flashed and the laughter began anew, and Moody closed his human eye in concentration. When it faded to black, Harry shrugged. "Well?"

"One more time, lad." He said nothing more, but turned to stare at the crib. After the memory had played out a third time, Moody simply pointed upward, indicating it was time to go.

One look at Moody and everyone knew he had solved the mystery. The old Auror was as white as a sheet. It was all Harry could do to keep from shaking him and demanding to know who was there, but he ground his teeth and waited for Moody to sink into a chair and catch his breath. Surprisingly, Lupin ran out of patience first. "For Merlin's sake, Alastor, who was it?"

"That wasn't laughter, Potter," began Moody hoarsely. "Crying. Easy mistake to make, they can sound the same."

"All right, fine, but whose?" said Harry.

Moody shook his head slowly, as though to negate his own words. "Even though I know that voice, I still wouldn't believe it, but I could see him. He was under an Invisibility cloak. Probably your father's. The baby could perceive just beneath it--he was too little to be fooled completely by the magic."

Moody's ragged face contorted even further as he took a deep breath and closed both eyes. "Are you going to tell it, or must I?" he said loudly. Harry frowned in confusion; was he supposed to know who was there? Moody may have been able to see past the Invisibility Cloak through the eyes of an innocent, but Harry hadn't discerned a thing.

It took a moment for him, and for everyone else present, to realize that Moody was not inviting Harry to answer his question. Moody was addressing someone in that very room, giving them one last chance to confess that they had stood at the head of Harry's bed the entire time. As each person caught on, they froze on the spot, soundless.

"You're quite right, Alastor; it would be best to hear it from me," came a weary voice from the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

## 39: Bubbles Burst

*Chapter 39 of 50*

Albus has some explaining to do. A stroke of insight reveals the mole in the Ministry.

"Get out."

Technically speaking, everyone in the room outranked Harry, yet no one hesitated to obey his order. Hagrid paused only long enough to scoop Ondossi from the floor, folding her nearly in half in his massive arms to keep from smacking her on the door frame as he hustled out of the office.

"Everyone," said Harry, his eyes never leaving Dumbledore's portrait. Several former Headmasters eyed each other with varying levels of affront, but the majority beat an immediate exit from their canvases. Those remaining apparently decided that they were better off complaining about Harry's audacity elsewhere, and slunk off reluctantly to landscapes unknown. A brief scuttling along the baseboards suggested that even the mice knew better than to stick around.

When every living or magical being had left the room but Harry and Dumbledore, a brief puff of flame announced Fawkes's arrival. The phoenix settled gently onto Harry's shoulder, though Harry didn't acknowledge his presence. Indeed, the young wizard did nothing but stare at the portrait, motionless, the rasping of his breath the only indication that anyone remained. Dumbledore stood silently in his frame with his head bowed, his hands resting flat atop a small table.

"Were you on his side the whole time?" Harry finally croaked.

Dumbledore did not look up. "No, Harry. Never. I am guilty of terrible treachery, but not that."

"Treachery? *Treachery*? How DARE you?" Harry raised his wand as though he could blast the portrait to bits with intentions alone, but Fawkes squeezed his shoulder firmly. After a moment he set the wand upon the desk, still pointed at the portrait, and spoke in a deep, measured voice.

"You knew he was coming for them."

Dumbledore's head bowed further. "I studied the portents in the stars with Firenze for months. They all indicated that Samhain would mark either the beginning or the end of the world. I knew something crucial would happen that night, though not where or when, or what it would be."

"Is that why you *stood by and let them die*?"

Dumbledore's head snapped up at last. "YES!" he bellowed fiercely; the word echoed through the Headmaster's office. "What happened in that house was ordained by powers greater than you or I or Lord Voldemort! I couldn't stop the events from unfolding, any more than a butterfly could stop the Hogwarts Express by floating over the tracks and flapping its wings."

Harry's face distorted with fury and he vaulted over the desk to grip the frame of the portrait. "Don't you lie to me! You could have killed him and ended it all!"

"I could have killed him," said Dumbledore, his voice low and cold, "but that would not have *ended* anything. You *know* that."

He did know it, of course, but it didn't matter. His parents were murdered as their trusted friend stood by and watched. Harry took up his wand again and held it at the ready, stalled only by uncertainty as to which curse one should cast to destroy a magical portrait.

Dumbledore dropped his gaze to the tabletop and said quietly, "Before you lash out in anger, Harry, consider what happened the last time."

Fawkes's grip on his shoulder became painfully tight. Harry abruptly spun away to the window, shattering the glass with a wordless hex. The shards caught the moonlight as they tumbled like a brief waterfall, and Harry smashed his fists down upon the open ledge as the cool night air poured over him. He breathed in gulps, his body shaking, until at last he screamed, a terrible sound that rang all the way to Hogsmeade. Every owl in the towers and every thestral in the forest took flight.

From the grounds below, a wolf howled mournfully in response.

*Remus.* Harry listened and breathed, breathed and listened, as the fury gradually subsided. He leaned far over the stone ledge and found the wolf, a dark smudge against the thinning snow at the base of the tower. He reached up and took Fawkes from his shoulder, holding him at arm's length outside the window. Only then did he notice that Fawkes was crying.

"Oh, Fawkes," he said with heartfelt tenderness, "don't be sad. Hush now. Go to him, let him know I'll be all right." Leaning against the ledge, he kissed the top of Fawkes's crimson head, pressing flat the three errant feathers that always flipped up at the front. "Go on, now. The worst is over." With a tiny trill, Fawkes squeezed Harry's wrist gently with his mighty talons, then hopped into a slow downward spiral.

Harry remained in the moonlight long after the howling ceased. His skin finally felt cool again, then cold, but still he stayed at the window. When the chill began to annoy him, he knew the shock had worn off at last. He turned abruptly from the window and rounded the Headmaster's desk, pausing only to toss several logs into the enormous fireplace with a flick of his wand. He cast a Bellows Charm as well, which made the fire climb rapidly, throwing off plenty of light and heat.

Harry manually spun the tall Headmaster's chair around to face Dumbledore's portrait, then sank into it. He settled his head and back deep into the cushions and stretched his arms along the rests, his knees wide apart; he wouldn't be leaving any time soon. He drummed his fingers silently for a moment and studied the portrait.

"Tell it."

Dumbledore nodded. "Where would you have me begin?"

"When you condemned them to death."

Sighing, Dumbledore, too, pulled up a chair from the back of the portrait. "That would be the day Sibyll Trelawney delivered to me the Prophecy. Of course, I had no idea at the time that they were the ones it named, or that a spy had overheard it. Or that there was a traitor so close to them within the Order, who would--"

"Enough," breathed Harry. "Why did you hide them, if the stars had already told you they were doomed?"

Dumbledore nodded. "You know the portents weren't that specific. I knew that if you were indeed the One, then it wouldn't matter if I interfered. Your fate would not be thwarted by any puny effort I might make. But *if* you were not the child in the Prophecy, hiding you away might spare your family from being struck down incidentally by the powers at play. It seemed like a worthwhile effort."

"You didn't hide the Longbottoms."

"They refused. They didn't put much stock into Divination, rather like Miss Granger. They were also trained Aurors, with tools from the Ministry at their disposal. They believed they could protect themselves and their home. And against a typical sort of attack, they certainly could; they were a very powerful team."

Harry's lip curled in disgust. "Too bad they were fighting the Ministry that night, not just Voldemort."

Rubbing his forehead, Dumbledore winced and shut his eyes a moment before continuing. "Quite true. We had long suspected certain people in the Ministry were Death Eaters--though we couldn't prove it, of course. The Longbottoms *thought* they knew who could be trusted and who couldn't. Just as young Sirius thought he could trust Peter. Betrayal is a terrible thing."

"Do go on," Harry spat.

Dumbledore clenched his fists and held them before his chest, but he set them back down on the tabletop slowly and controlled. "You must listen to me, Harry! I had few choices that night, and I did what was within my power. I hid your parents to keep them out of the magical crossfire if possible. I told the Longbottoms what I could and urged them to fortify their defenses. But Harry, any number of things could have happened that night--it was to be the beginning OR end of the world! Voldemort might have launched an attack on Hogwarts, or he might have revealed the wizard world to the Muggles in some horrendous fashion that couldn't be erased. The portents in the stars might have had nothing to do with the Prophecy. I simply *didn't know!*"

He slumped in his chair. "I've never felt so helpless, Harry. All the scrying and Divination I attempted were for naught; the future was too uncertain. So I did what I could to protect the children of the Prophecy, and then I went back to Hogwarts to protect the others in my care. The Centaurs were on guard that night, and certain of the staff, but I couldn't even trust all of them! There was an unknown traitor in the Order, and it might have been Minerva. Or someone very close to her."

"But you left Hogwarts, to go to Godric's Hollow," said Harry quietly.

"I did. And to the Longbottoms. And a few other places as well. The waiting was terrible, Harry. I made Portkeys, that I might check in for just a moment. I couldn't risk being seen away from the castle, in case Hogwarts was the true target. I asked your father to lend me his Invisibility Cloak that afternoon, that I might move about in secret."

Dumbledore's eyes welled up, and he paused to wipe them with the heels of his hands. "I stopped in Hogsmeade first. I'd heard a sound, which turned out to be some foolish Halloween revelry, but it came from that direction and startled me. I spent but a moment investigating, then returned to the castle. I picked up my next Portkey and went to Lancashire. The Longbottoms were bidding goodnight to the last guests from their Halloween feast. I went back to the castle again and took the next Portkey to your parents' home. I arrived just as James cried out, 'I'll hold him off!' And now you have seen the rest."

Harry's blood threatened to boil once again, but he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Too late to save my father. But you could have saved *her*."

"I could NOT! When Lily burst into the room with Tom but a step behind her, I had to let the events play out. 'The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal.' I didn't know how he would do it, but I had to let it happen, Harry. If you were the Chosen, then he had to leave his mark."

"And if I wasn't 'the one,' you would've watched me die," said Harry quietly.

Dumbledore wrung his hands. "I couldn't interfere! Not to save James or Lily, or you. 'The beginning or end of the *world*,' Harry. No man should knowingly face such a moment!"

Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall back into the chair. Sirius's memories of that same Halloween played through his mind: the panic, not knowing whether James was alive or dead, then the paralyzing knowledge that one of his remaining friends had betrayed them. It was nothing like facing Voldemort head on, where friend and foe, good and evil were clearly defined. Sirius even had to sit down and write out a list in order to plan his next move.

As much as Harry *wanted* to hate Dumbledore at that moment, he couldn't.

Suddenly weary, Harry opened his eyes again but did not raise his head. "Why'd you just leave me there, after I was marked?"

Dumbledore set his jaw, shifting in his chair. "I had just seen a miracle. The Killing Curse, repelled by a baby, right before my eyes. But what did it mean? You were marked, all right... but his equal in *what?*"

Dumbledore paused. "I watched you fulfill Tom's foremost wish, Harry: to cheat death. That was the moment I realized that the Prophecy never said you would *save us* from darkness, only that you had the power to vanquish it. And a wizard who was Tom's equal might not choose to simply depose him. He might prefer to *take Tom's place*."

"Of course," said Harry. "Useless field, Divination, if you ask me. After all it had told you about the future, you still didn't know if I was the beginning or the end of the world, or if I deserved to live or die. So you ran."

Dumbledore bit his lip. "I wouldn't put it quite so harshly, Harry, but in summary, yes."



"And then you sent Hagrid to do your dirty work, knowing he might be facing

something worse than Voldemort?" Harry's words were filled with venom. Dumbledore straightened his back angrily and responded in kind.

"I am no coward, Harry Potter! I sent Hagrid because I learned something about him long ago. Hagrid, for all his faults, has a rare talent: he can, when he applies himself, tell good from evil. As simple as that. He can see beyond the layers of ego and deceit and find the truth deep within any being. That's why he's so fearless, Harry. He can identify his enemies, no matter how kind or flattering they might act, and he can also see past the most terrifying exterior to the noble heart within." Harry's mouth fell open, for he had been in Hagrid's mind and knew precisely what Dumbledore was talking about, though he hadn't taken proper note of it before.

Dumbledore nodded. "Like you, Harry, Hagrid grew into his magic. It began with animals. That's why he befriended Aragog, who truly was a fine arachnid, even if his children turned out to be ruffians." Harry sneered; those same ruffians nearly proved their quality by eating him and Ron alive.

"He was in his forties before he could read people the same way," the Headmaster continued. "Had it come earlier, he might have seen Tom Riddle for what he really was. Of course, that business with your godfather cost him a great deal of confidence; when Sirius was convicted and sentenced, Hagrid was convinced his magic had failed him. Yet another mistake of mine, I fear, Harry, for I, too, doubted Hagrid's magic, instead of doubting the verdict of the Wizengamot."

Harry marveled for a moment. When he first met Hagrid, Uncle Vernon had hidden the entire family from Harry's repeated invitations to Hogwarts. Hagrid had walked into the hut as though he'd known all of them his whole life. Right away he'd had no use for the Dursleys--even called Uncle Vernon an old prune. And he'd recognized Harry from Dudley without hesitation, even though they were the same age. "So you sent him to look at my heart."

Dumbledore sighed, the slightest twinkle sparkling in his eyes for the first time. "I did, Harry. All the Divination in the world is no match for a man with the ability to see the truth." He frowned. "Though I was annoyed with him for surrendering you to Sirius Black. I still didn't know if he'd betrayed your parents in the first place! And even if he were loyal, I knew your story would fuel the Prophet like none other, and Sirius does tend to ham it up in the limelight."

"Which brings us back to why I'm here in the first place," said Harry. "The traitor in the Ministry. He told the Prophet that Voldemort was dead, and tried to turn Neville into the 'Boy Who Lived.' If it hadn't been for Sirius, he might've succeeded, too."

Dumbledore raised his brows. "I think not, Harry; I would not have allowed that deception. Unfortunately, I didn't bother checking with the Prophet that night, or the next morning, or I would have put a stop to it myself. I'm afraid I was preoccupied at that time."

Harry's palms and soles suddenly tingled. "So let me guess," he said in disgust. "You have no idea who the traitor is, either."

"Alas, Harry, I do not." The Headmaster sighed miserably. "I should have suspected foul play when Hagrid told me about the driver, and the theft of the body. I should have known this accomplice was important and tracked them down. But I assumed that the driver was one of Tom's cronies, who hid the body for reasons of his own--most likely to keep the news from spreading until he could take advantage of it. He was irrelevant, I thought. The real miracle of the evening was that you'd survived the Killing Curse, and I needed to plan for your future. I spent the next twenty-four hours researching ways to protect you and your Muggle relatives. Then I recognized that your mother's love had already warded you more securely than any spell I could cast--if, that is, I could convince your aunt to take you in."

"After I had you settled safely away, I desperately needed rest. When I awoke the following morning, the Ministry had recanted their claim of having a 'boy who lived' in custody, Sirius Black had been convicted of treason and murder, and Hagrid was adamantly denying that the first of November had ever happened." He sighed. "I thought the dear chap was being metaphorical--that he didn't want it known he'd turned you over to Sirius, even though you were later recovered safe and sound. As I said, it was a terrible blow to his confidence, believing he'd been deceived about Black's character. I assumed it was just too painful for him to talk about, and left it at that."

"Pity he never took a good look at Peter Pettigrew," muttered Harry. "Or that we can't haul the entire Ministry in front of him for an assessment. I don't know how we're going to find this traitor."

Dumbledore rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I might suggest, Harry, that the traitor had many errands that Samhain. The body had to be hidden, many Aurors had to be Obliviated, and of course the traitor had to kidnap young Neville and take him to the Ministry."

Harry sniffed. "I know. I thought about that too. The Longbottoms probably know who it was, if only they could tell it. And they've suffered so much, I didn't want to force them into Legilimency. Especially since the traitor probably used the same blocking curse on them as he put in Sirius's memory. I'd just be kicked out of their heads without seeing anything useful."

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore, tapping his fingernails on the tabletop, "I agree it would be cruel to impose your magic on poor Frank and Alice Longbottom, but they were not the only ones the traitor visited that night."

Suddenly all of Harry's weariness disappeared, and he sprang from the chair. "Neville."

Harry took the spiral stairs two and three steps at a time, bursting through the office door at full speed. Ron, Hermione, and Viktor were seated on the floor of the corridor, leaning against the wall with their legs out straight. All three looked up in surprise, but Harry didn't even slow down, just waved an impatient hand as he headed toward Gryffindor Tower. "Come on!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Viktor caught up first, just as Harry reached the portrait hole. The Fat Lady was nowhere to be seen; a pink sheet of parchment inside the painting proclaimed, "Back in a Trifle," in frilly cursive handwriting. Harry swore.

"Portraits are all in library with Headmasters," Viktor explained. "Whole castle is vagging tongues. Fat Lady vill return as soon as word spreads that you haff left office." Harry responded with an irritated grunt.

"Harry, what's happened?" Hermione panted, nearly skidding into Viktor's back.

"Neville. I can't believe I never thought of it! Neville saw the traitor the night he was kidnapped. He must have! And he was just a little baby, why bother Obliviating him, right? He wouldn't remember anything, and even if he did, he wouldn't know what any of it meant. Just someone taking him to Mum and Dad's office for a little while. Oh, where IS she?" Harry snarled, peering into the portrait from a steep angle as though he might spot the Fat Lady dawdling by her vanishing point.

"Is good she is not here," said Viktor, earning a dirty look from Harry.

"What?"

"Professor said this kind of memory leads to madness. Would you haff Neville joining his parents in St. Mungo's?"

Harry stopped in mid-retort, his mouth hanging open. Hermione glanced back and forth between the two of them. "Is this true?" she asked, in a way that suggested Harry might as well start apologizing up front, to save time later.

He cleared his throat. "I kind of forgot about that," he said, cringing instinctively. "I'm so glad I have friends around to remind me," he added hopefully, just as the Fat Lady entered the portrait through a door in the distant background. Hermione gave him a searing look, but aside from that and a noisy flounce, he escaped without further chastising.

The Fat Lady made a show of sauntering to the foreground as though her absence from her post was commonplace, but when she recognized Harry's tousled head, she hoisted her petticoats to mid-calf and broke into a sprint. "Harry, dear, what happened?" she said tearfully as she filled the frame, completely ignoring Ron, who had given the password seconds earlier.

"It's all right," Harry said. "It wasn't as bad as it sounded. But we really need to get in, if you don't mind."

She stared at him blankly for an instant, then sheepishly swung her canvas aside. "Sorry, dears, sorry," she mumbled. "We were all so worried."

Hermione waved the wizards to go ahead through the portrait hole, pausing to smile and pat the Fat Lady's frame reassuringly. "Don't feel left out, he hasn't even told *us* yet. Only we've got to speak to Neville just now."

The Fat Lady took out a kerchief and patted her forehead daintily. "He's inside," she said, adding, "You young people switch to new topics much too quickly for my taste."

They found Neville in the common room studying for the N.E.W.T.s, and hauled the bewildered fellow out of his armchair. "Steady on!" he protested, unable to make sense of three insistent voices demanding that he get up. "Is there an attack? You want me to what?" Neville brandished his wand, ready for any challenge, but stood his ground.

Harry quickly explained the plan as Neville's expression grew more and more dubious. "You want me to *let* Professor Ondossi into my mind? What in the name of Merlin for?"

"Because you're the only one who might have seen the kidnapper, and not been Obliviated!" said Harry.

Neville frowned even harder. "What kidnapper?"

"The one who--oh, never mind! Just..." He cupped Neville's chin in his hand and peered into his eyes, letting his magic pour into this other mind, filling it with images and concepts, not mere words. It took but seconds to convey everything Harry had learned about that Halloween night. When he broke the contact, Neville's mouth fell open and he went pale.

*Oops.* He patted the dumbstruck wizard apologetically on the shoulders. "Sorry. That was a bit quick. But it wasn't all that bad, was it?"

Neville blinked a few times, still processing the information. "Quick, right. Pity you can't do that for exams. I was kidnapped? Mother of Merlin, Harry, I might have ended up in your shoes!"

"Exactly," said Harry. "Someone set you up to attract all the attention, so meanwhile he could sneak about and take advantage of Voldemort's death."

Scowling, Neville rose to his full height. "And he set up my parents. We're *so* doing this, Harry."

They rushed to the library, still crowded with gossiping portraits. Madam Pince would have torn her hair out on account of the noise, but thankfully she closed the library early during holidays and was nowhere to be seen. Professor McGonagall leapt to her feet at the sight of them, deep concern lining her thin face, but Harry rushed right past her to Hagrid's side. "Tura! Wake up!" he said to the limp bundle tucked protectively in Hagrid's elbow, then pressed his hand to her forehead. *Tura, you've got to come out of it. We went after the wrong memory--Neville saw the traitor that night!*

*Did I say you could come in here?* Tura's angry reply blew through him like a bitter wind. To Harry, it seemed as though he'd unexpectedly walked into an enormous vaulted chamber made of blinding white marble, or perhaps ice, with a gaping black pit in the center of the floor. He had never encountered her ungarded mind before. The "ceiling" stretched so high he couldn't see it, but he knew it was there, finite, limited. But so much was crammed into the space--how many memories, *lifetimes* had she witnessed and made her own? Harry perceived that the whiteness was made up of many colors; it refracted into scintillating bursts just outside his focus.

*Enough rubbernecking, chump,* she said all around him, and the doors of Occlumency slammed down, leaving him in darkness. He stumbled at the sudden return to his own mind. She was looking at him though. *Your mind will be the same in time,* she projected. *Except yours is red, like Fawkes.*

"Will you help me with Neville?" he asked aloud.

*Bring him here.*

Propped up against Hagrid, she wordlessly entwined her fingers with Harry's and placed them on Neville's forehead. Before touching his mind, however, she broke her silence. "Neville Longbottom. This is a dangerous task. The memory we seek is part of your very foundation, the anchor upon which all other memories are built. It was not meant to be recalled. You saw what such recollection did to Harry Potter: nightmares, obsessions. You might suffer the same, or worse. Is it your will that we find this memory?"

Neville's voice was firm and determined. "Yes, Professor. Do it."

She smiled before they dove together into Neville's consciousness.

The recent taste of real Legilimency that Harry had performed on Draco Malfoy had left him hungry to release his magic, more than he'd been willing to admit. What had once felt awkward and out of control now seemed the most natural thing in the world. Free from the confines of his own mind, he could revel in the power and strength of pure sorcery, and the rush made him want to throw back his head and arms and shout his joy to the heavens.

Then Tura piped up. "Yeah, yeah. Rein it in, hotshot."

"Have you ever blown up a balloon and just let it go before tying it?" Harry grumbled.

She laughed. "Sorry to deflate you, baby, but we're here on business. Besides, this is my second time going deep in one night, and you don't see me soaring around all puffed up."

He couldn't see her at all, or even hear the words she was saying; her meaning simply poured into him. Harry realized that she was really performing Legilimency on both him and Neville at the same time. With a metaphorical sly grin, he withdrew just enough to feel her hand entwined with his, then let his magic flow along her arm and into her as well. Sure enough, she too was brimming with elation, just carefully concealing it within herself.

"Busted!" announced Harry mischievously.

"Fine, ya got me. Now can we get to work here?" She wasn't fooling him, though; he could see the sparkle of gaiety behind her grudging concession. Cheerfully smug, he wove into her mind and returned to Neville.

Where to begin? Much of Neville's inner world was organized and logical, the mind of a scientist with a huge fund of knowledge in plants and taxonomy. The patterns of study and memorization were everywhere, clearly developed when he was very young and honed to precision over time. Harry let Tura lead, but he could grasp the trail she was following, spiralling inward along the path of his intellect to a younger, unschooled time.

The further they went, the more he saw the footprints of Neville's grandmother. Neville was never good enough, smart enough, talented enough; in short, he was not her *son*. He was not the man she'd already raised, the man who had been cut down, and she had forced much of her grief onto her grandson.

At a tender age, he lacked his father's sensibility and his magical prowess, and Gran bitterly pointed that out at every opportunity. But unlike wisdom and sorcery, intelligence manifests very early. A burst of shame (or at best a hollow disappointment) always followed even the most sincere attempts at magic, but whenever he recited a fact from a book, Gran would show at least a modicum of approval. Young Neville instinctively grasped such rewards and punishments, and became a performing puppet for her, memorizing and regurgitating whatever he could find.

A wave of compassion came from Tura, but to his surprise it was not for Neville, but for his grandmother. "I've seen this before, with *aanaruabiik*. Her grief for her son cost her the pleasure of her grandson as well. My father's gift just keeps on giving."

"Neville's the one you ought to feel sorry for," Harry said pointedly. "He's the one that had to fill a grown man's shoes when he was just a tot."

"True, but he also had you, Harry, and Hogwarts. You guys liked him even when he wasn't a walking encyclopedia. That helped him get past it; he'll be all right. But his grandma... She'll never get past her loss."

"There," she said after a poignant silence, steering them into a fog of memory. "We're getting closer."

To Harry, it felt like the Triwizard Tournament all over again, sinking into the unknown depths of the lake. "It's like soup in here! How'd you ever find *my* memory of that night?"

"Wasn't me!" came her reply. "The Dementors found it. That's what they're made to do. Then the Dark Lord spent a year tugging it to the surface. I just followed the trail. But here I'm trying to tread a little more lightly!"

"Fine, tread as light as you want, but teach me as you do it!" Sometimes the woman could be as thick as a fallen tree.

*Contrition.* "Oh. Yeah. All right, I think right now we've gone back too far. This is entirely preverbal stuff. It's much harder to trace anything here; words do so much toward organizing our memories. But by fifteen months a baby knows some words, even if he can't say them. He was only weeks old when these memories formed."

She pointed out a current that he could barely see. "That's a pattern of some kind. A strong one. Probably some sort of mother-child attachment." Pulling Harry along, she let herself be drawn into it, a whirlwind of images and emotions carrying them forward through time. Presently shapes began to coalesce around them: Mum, Dad, bed, bear. Tura pulled him aside, clinging to a memory of a fuzzy blanket. "Now we're in the groove. This is the age for an avalanche of language. We have to move slow and look through every memory, or we'll get sucked off into some nuance of meaning that'll drag us right back to adulthood."

Harry didn't have the foggiest idea what she was blathering about, but he sensed they were at a cusp between the infant and the boy. It was far, far greater than any changes between boy and man, the formation of a separate identity that was and always would be Neville Longbottom. He stayed close to Tura, suddenly appreciating her earlier cautions about shaking up Neville's foundations.

*Excitement.* "Birthday cake!" Tura tugged him toward it, a single candle flickering curiously atop vanilla frosting. "Halloween had a party as well, Harry--we need to find engrams like anticipation, decorating the house, celebrating, things like that."

Candles. Neville watched them in the jack-o-lanterns just as he had watched the one on his cake. He blew several of them out and was quite surprised to find that, rather than clapping and congratulating him, Dada put the pumpkin up high and handed him a toy. "I have it," Harry whispered to Tura, as though afraid to startle the fragile memory into flight.

Guests came, bringing in a gust of chill autumn air that made the candles flicker enticingly. The house filled with good smells and soon Neville was in his high chair, devouring dinner and marveling at all the faces around the long table. All too soon Mum took him to bed as he howled in protest; he knew something interesting was happening with all those people there and he wanted to be part of it. But he couldn't resist the warm lap and shoulder and the motion of the rocking chair, and soon his heavy eyelids betrayed him and fell shut.

When they opened again, they fixed on the sweaty, filthy face of Cornelius Fudge.

*Patience.* Harry wanted to leap out of Neville's mind and into the nearest Floo, but he felt Tura's admonishment and stayed with her. "Don't assume. This is too important for mistakes. Neville may have woken up after he'd been handed off to the Ministry; we have to be sure."

It didn't seem like they were at the Ministry; in fact, it *did* seem as though they were in an automobile, but it was impossible to tell. Neville kept falling back to sleep, waking for a few seconds at a time, never long enough to take in the surroundings. If Harry had been entirely in his own body, he would have been pacing back and forth and wringing his hands.

At last Neville was plopped rudely onto a cold desk and woke in earnest. Now he was on Level One of the Ministry, being ogled by dozens of strangers and portraits. He became upset and began to cry, but snatches of conversation filtered through the sobbing. "... killed You-Know-Who ..." "... just a baby ..." and other unrevealing comments. Some matronly witch finally picked him up and sang him a soothing song until he calmed down. In the meantime, Fudge had disappeared.

"He's probably off trying to track down the real me," growled Harry.

"Then we'll wait until he gets back," said Tura. "We might not be 100% sure until he takes the baby home, but if that's what it takes..."

Neville soon grew tired and cranky, and the witch rocked him to sleep despite his unwillingness to settle down for a stranger. Flash bulbs popped him awake later; the *Prophet* had showed up to photograph the Boy Who Lived. Harry noted with pleasure that if the scam had continued until the afternoon edition, the front page would have been covered with a furiously sobbing miracle baby.

It seemed the night would never end, with the poor toddler being constantly jostled into semiconsciousness by strange hands, but at last he woke to sunlight streaming through the rear window of an automobile. A telephone pole passed swiftly through his vision; they were moving. The traitor was bringing Neville home.

"Any minute now, I'll have you," Harry breathed.

There was a man's voice droning in the front seat, almost like the radio but too erratic. He was talking to himself. It sounded like Fudge, but not quite right. Tura noticed it too; he could feel her trepidation.

"Something's strange here. I met Fudge--he's the one who insisted I needed a work visa. He's a jerk, but he's a slick jerk. This person is strung out and rattled--he's talking to himself, for cryin' out loud. Maybe he's under the Imperius?"

Neville sat up, curious for the moment about being in an automobile. Fudge kept muttering, his eyes on the road, unaware of the observer in the back seat. His pinstriped suit was rumpled and dirty, and his everpresent lime-green derby lay on the floor of the back seat. Harry groaned inwardly; had they chased down another dead end?

"Merlin's beard, I'm glad I didn't kill them," Fudge said. With Neville sitting up, the words were clearer. "I drop off the boy and give them a quick wipe, and all's well on that score. Then it's but a matter of waiting at Hogwarts. Dumbledore can't hide him forever, not from his staff. Impossible! Even in a castle that size, the staff will know if there's a baby. Argus will tell me, I can always rely on him. And that blabbermouth giant, I can rely on him as well, the big idiot."

Growing hungry, Neville whimpered, attracting the gaze of the driver via the rear-view mirror. "You're up, then? Well, you'll just have to sit tight, won't you? You're lucky I don't dump you in a ditch, you know. But I can't have two Aurors and their son just disappear after all the press last night." This did nothing to ease the discomfort in Neville's tummy, and his whimpering became more vehement.

"Oh, you rotten brat! Be still! We're almost to your house, then you can cry to your mother! Believe me, I'd much rather Apparate you there, but I can hardly leave the Master's body alone in the trunk, can I?" Tura gave Harry the psychic equivalent of a high-five, clearly delighted that Voldemort's remains had suffered the indignity of being carted around the countryside like luggage.

By the time Fudge parked the automobile, both he and the baby were crying. He yanked the boy from the back seat and hauled him up the cobbled path to the

Longbottom's front porch. Neville's parents were poised like statues just inside, obviously frozen by a Body-Bind curse in the act of defending their home. "Here's your mummy, then!" Fudge screeched, his voice breaking shrilly. *"Imperio! Finite Petrificus!"* he added, his wand pointed at Alice Longbottom. She slumped stiffly to her knees, but Fudge must have sent a nonverbal order, because she immediately picked up Neville and tried to soothe him.

Harry felt Tura yank away for an instant.

"Someone's shaking me," she said. "My body must be dying. We have to go, Harry. Now."

"Oh, no. Not after all this! I'm not going anywhere until I--"

He felt a sudden, irresistible tug back toward his own mind, and realized someone was shaking his body, too.

"We'll try again," Tura began, but both focused again on the scene as Fudge collapsed into a chair and began to bubble and quiver. Harry recognized it instantly: the effects of Polyjuice Potion wearing off.

"Go. I'll be right behind you," he said.

"If you don't come *now*, you might not have a body to return to!" He felt a deep wrenching and nearly lost the memory.

"No!" But he couldn't resist the combination of her fierce guidance and the primal instinct to preserve his own life. He focused on the memory, dragging it along with him as far as he could, then let it go.

Harry snapped awake, weak, cold, and gasping for air. Fawkes was clawing frantically at his forehead. When he tried to touch his familiar's mind and reassure him, Fawkes slammed him back into his body with such intense magic that Harry could see it, a glowing red stake driven through his heart. He couldn't speak, but he reasoned that Fawkes would be most comforted to see the color restored to his flesh.

Harry yielded to the numbing calm and willed his body to recover. There was no need for haste. He'd held the memory long enough to find the answer he sought, and the traitor would not escape. Not this time.

In an unused ward of St. Mungo's Hospital, a green-robed Healer guided Alice Longbottom to a chair. She complied with the gentle tugs as always, allowing herself to be steered into place; she had no impulse to fight. Alice generally took in very little about her surroundings, being far too busy fighting with the demons within her mind.

Who is he? What does he want? What's he saying? A chorus of voices muttered somewhere behind her, whispering most of the time, sometimes talking, sometimes shouting. They never shut up, even though they never said anything useful, just questions, questions, stupid questions, constantly, one after another so quickly that there was never any time to answer any of them and yet they kept asking and asking--

*Oh, there's a man here. I think I know him. He called me Alice.* How did he know your name? Who is he? Why is he sitting on your bench, did he just say Neville, how does he know about Neville when's Neville coming--

Her thoughts were truly broken, displayed like bits and baubles in a kaleidoscope, fleeting fragments reflected upon themselves so many times that their original, complete shape was utterly lost in the collage. She had no order, no path to follow, no history--and only a snip of the present, before the voices would blur everything into chaos.

The man regarded her kindly, as though he understood the act of will required to pull herself out of that miasma, to focus even for a second on the here and now. There was no beginning, no end, just an ongoing battle with madness and voices. Hopeless, unbeatable. Why bother trying? Why fight it? Why not just give up, why not fold into yourself and die, why not quiet us once and for all why keep living--

Sirius Black patted her hand gently. "Just hang on a little longer, Alice. We're going to try to break the curse."

What does he want? What curse? Who is he... The voices were impossible to ignore, like sitting on an anthill, yet Alice always did her best. She knew if she fought them, she could remember her son, her little boy. He seemed to be quite big now, but she could never be sure in this timeless place until she saw him. She always tried to tell him that she was still within, watching him and loving him. That was why she handed him old gum wrappers like treasures. *I'm trapped in this bubble*, each wrapper said, though she wasn't quite sure they really conveyed the message.

There's another one, and another. Who are they? Alice had seen the young man with glasses once before. Was it yesterday? No, no, it must have been long ago; he was younger that time, thinner and more worn-looking. He had grown, too. That meant Neville must be older too.

Their words were meaningless to Alice, but she perceived the anger behind them. Suddenly she realized there were a lot of people in the room. How did they all get in here? Why do so many of them have red hair? What are they saying to that one, are they angry with you what did you do wrong now you stupid stupid woman-- Alice wanted Neville to be there. No one but Neville ever came to see her, now suddenly there were all those people. Surely Neville was one of them?

There was too much anger, too much hatred in the room. Alice began to sing a tuneless song, hoping to block out some of their ambience, as they were only making the voices louder and more agitated. She looked up at the one with glasses, the one who spoke the softest, yet with the most intensity. *He'll get the message*, she suddenly decided, and softly padded to his side.

Harry turned when he felt the lightest tap on his shoulder. Alice Longbottom had come up behind him and was earnestly offering him a gum wrapper. He took it delicately and, placing a steady hand about her waist, pulled her gently to stand beside him. "You'll start by removing the curse you placed on her memories," he said.

"And if I refuse?" sneered the traitor.

Ondossi knew Harry was in no mood for taunting. She stepped forward before he could answer. "Then I will *compel* your cooperation." She emphasized her point by snatching the traitor's left wrist and revealing the Dark Mark above it, which promptly began to blister.

That the Master's Mark responded to Ondossi's magic was more than the traitor could bear. Dolores Umbridge raised her wand. *"Finite Compescogito,"* she sobbed.

For the first time in sixteen years, all was quiet in Alice Longbottom's mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

A/N: The voices in Alice's head spoke in color, but the text color command doesn't seem to work here on TPP. So it's a little trickier to read. \*shrug\*

# 40: The Turn of the Tide

## Chapter 40 of 50

The Ministry traitor is left without secrets, and Harry realizes his fate is rushing up to meet him.

Ron elbowed Harry and pointed upward. He groaned, knowing full well what Ron was indicating. "Another one?"

"Yep. A real whopper this time."

Forcing a kind expression over his embarrassment, Harry barely looked up in time to catch his poor overloaded owl in mid swoop. Hedwig puffed noisily through her bill, the feathers on her chest and belly disheveled by the huge parcel she'd hauled. "Poor girl. You've worked more this month than in your entire life!" He'd stopped carrying owl treats, feeding her ham and bacon right from his breakfast plate instead. Neville's grandmother had sent him gifts every single morning of the Easter holidays, and Hedwig looked like she needed a nice, long roost.

"Send a school owl back with your thank-you note this time," Hermione advised. "Hedwig needs some rest!"

Harry peered over his glasses dubiously. "Right. She'd peck my eyes out if I presumed to use another owl. I'm lucky she tolerates me after that whole Fawkes business." Hedwig glared at him reproachfully at the mention of her rival's name, then shook her tail over his plate until his breakfast was covered in bits of fuzzy down. She snatched an unspoiled sausage and flapped off to eat it in the rafters.

"You had to go and mention Fawkes," said Ron. "Better move, Harry, she's perched right over your head." Grumbling, Harry picked up the parcel and shifted to the other side of the table.

"Chocolate bunnies!" cooed Hermione, as a stampede of the things, each one wrapped in colorful foil, hopped out of the package. "Those are even yummier than the frogs!"

"You don't get a Famous Wizard Card with the bunnies, though," Ron pointed out.

Harry already had a lap full of wriggly rabbits, and more were leaping out of the parcel. "A little help? Come on, eat some of them. Morgan le Fay, I don't know what Gran's thinking, sending me so much food."

"Probably that you need fattening up," Ron mumbled around a mouthful of chocolate.

"Don't just bite off the ears!" said Hermione.

"What? They don't mind!" Ron replied indignantly. Several earless bunnies, their wrappers pulled down to their necks, confirmed this by bounding happily around his plate.

"I know that! Bite the legs off so they stop jumping everywhere," she snapped.

Seeing the wisdom in that statement, Ron extracted a bunny from his goblet of grapefruit juice and promptly chomped off the back feet. Undaunted, the candy began to pull itself over his napkin by its front paws, leaving a sticky trail of juice and caramel filling.

"You've made her so happy, Harry," Hermione said, patting his hand and capturing a bunny that was attempting to crawl up his sleeve. "Besides, it isn't as though it's going to waste. It's Hufflepuff's turn today; we can take these down right after breakfast." Every common room in the castle *and* the drawing room at Grimmauld Place had been feasting on treats from Gran lately.

Harry responded with a squeal and a lurch that sent a hundred bunnies to the floor, where they promptly scattered like a handful of ball bearings. "Gerroff!" he screeched, leaping frantically; a bunny had managed to sneak all the way to his armpit and was tickling him without mercy. His friends simply sat there and enjoyed the show.

"Some bodyguard you are," he finally growled at Viktor, after shaking out both sleeves.

Viktor shrugged. "Is not my job protecting you from candy."

The spring holidays were nearly over, and Harry hoped sincerely that Mrs. Longbottom would stop sending him packages. Not only was Hedwig working her feathers to the quill hauling loot across the countryside, but he felt distinctly uneasy about receiving so much gratitude. Percy had done all the footwork to reveal the traitor, and Arthur Weasley made a huge effort to lure Umbridge into St. Mungo's without arousing her suspicions.

Once they had her cornered, she had two choices: to confess, or to let Harry and Ondossi extract the confession from her. She had wept to Mr. Weasley about her right to a fair trial, and threatened to pull strings within the Wizengamot--until Ondossi's demonstration on her Dark Mark. Harry wished Tura had been a little more subtle, as everyone in the room blanched at her obvious use of Dark magic, but at least it inspired Umbridge to stop whining and start singing.

She released the curses on Alice and Frank Longbottom, who still remained in St. Mungo's Hospital for rehabilitation but were no longer locked inside their own minds. At that point Umbridge had attempted a plea bargain, claiming she could help others and offer information in exchange for leniency. But then Sirius Black stepped out of the little alcove where he'd been hiding with Alice Longbottom.

Harry had given Sirius his father's wand, and this time it had worked as if it had belonged to his godfather all along. Fiery sparks issued from it as he rounded the corner, and he shimmered as though furious magic was pouring from him in waves. "Oh, you'll have leniency, Umbridge," Sirius said, "just as much as you granted me. Release the curse you put in my head, or I'll break it myself by killing you right now." At first glance, Harry couldn't tell if he was bluffing or not. Apparently neither could Umbridge, as she turned ghostly pale and croaked the *Finite* charm like a toad.

The rush of memories made Sirius stumble, but he caught himself and stood staring at Umbridge for some time. "There was no trial, no bargaining for me, was there?" he finally hissed. "You took me, after Fudge brought me in for 'murdering' Wormtail. Threw me into the Seat of Judgment and forced Veritaserum down my throat. Between that and the Cruciatus, you learned all you wanted to know about Harry and the Horcrux he'd borne."

Sirius turned away from her in disgust and faced Arthur Weasley. "The Lady herself stopped my tongue from revealing the Sisterhood. I was able to claim I acted alone to destroy the Horcrux, despite the Veritaserum. Otherwise you and Molly and the Daughters of Modron would have been next." He whipped back around and jabbed his wand under Umbridge's chin. "I'd kill you right now," he breathed, "but the Starlight Lady doesn't approve of murder in cold blood. I won't stain my hands over the likes of

you."

Arthur Weasley nodded in approval and handed Sirius a Portkey to Siberia. "Best leave her to the Order, lad," he said, patting the younger wizard on the shoulder. "Maybe she can help us narrow down your search."

Harry and Ondossi spent the next two days relentlessly combing through Umbridge's mind for information. It proved challenging, not because her mind was difficult to open, but because its contents were so utterly repulsive.

"Why don't you just do my whole fifth year?" Harry growled, livid from Umbridge's sadistic recollections of making him write lines with her "special quill." Harry learned it been Voldemort's idea all along, in order to weaken him with anemia and better penetrate his dreams at night. "I'm sick of finding out just how many ways people were conspiring against me."

Tura, who had nearly killed Umbridge upon discovering that she had recommended the Alaskan tundra as an ideal spot to hide away a secret child, agreed with a snort. "I hear that!" she said. "It's nice to know that I'm not just paranoid--hags like this really *were* out to get me." They finally decided to work together, in hopes that one would stay calm during the other's murderous moments.

Using Polyjuice Potion to disguise herself as Cornelius Fudge, Umbridge had driven Voldemort to Godric's Hollow (with a helpful map drawn by Peter Pettigrew). She watched the green flash of the *Kedavra* curse through the front door, then out of an upstairs window. But then to her astonishment, a great burst of red/orange magic blasted the house to the ground, nearly flipping her automobile onto its side.

She'd never seen magic of that color before. Wondering if the Dark Lord had cast some special curse to annihilate this upstart, she felt a peculiar tingling in her left arm. She knew intuitively that, were it not already disguised, her Dark Mark would have faded right before her eyes.

Lord Voldemort was dead. That cursed fraud Trelawney had been spot on for a change with her insipid prophecy, and now things were about to become incredibly complicated. Umbridge resolved to exact revenge for that at some point.

Ever the optimist, however, Umbridge knew there must be a way to take advantage of the situation. She rushed from the car to find the Master, who was most definitely dead. Her first instinct was to haul the corpse out of the wreckage and hide it. Eventually people would catch on, but for a few critical days, perhaps she could maintain the illusion that he was alive and well. A lot could be accomplished in a few days.

Once the evidence was stashed safely in the trunk and she was driving away without the headlights on, she took a moment to ponder her next few moves. Dumbledore had hidden this family away because he suspected their child was the one mentioned in the Prophecy--the one who had the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. He, too, was spot on with that assessment. Furthermore, he would undoubtedly broadcast that fact at the earliest opportunity. As soon as Dumbledore saw the ruined house, he would know the Master was defeated and *her* machinations would come crashing to a halt.

"Can't let you gloat all the way to the Prophet, can I, Albus?" she muttered aloud. As long as the body was not recovered, there would be plenty of doubt in Albus's claims. The Death Eaters would be the only ones that knew for sure that Voldemort was dead, and they could hardly run about raising their sleeves and saying, "Yes, Dumbledore's right! Look here! My Dark Mark has faded!" Still, the old fool's story would dispel their own doubts about the Master's status, and that would make coercing them very difficult. Confound that meddlesome geezer! There had to be a way to keep him quiet long enough for her to take SOME advantage of the situation.

There were Muggle rescue vehicles approaching, and Magical Catastrophes would not be far behind. Umbridge pulled the car off the road and parked it in a stand of trees. Careful not to be spotted from the road, she trotted the quarter-mile or so to the scene of the disaster. "Mr. Fudge!" someone called. She nearly ignored the voice until she remembered her disguise.

"What happened here?" she demanded gruffly. Might as well suss out the prevailing opinions.

"Explosion of wild magic, sir. Leveled the house and killed the occupants. We haven't identified the cause just yet."

*Excellent!* "Keep working, then. The victims--Muggle or wizard?"

"Sorcerers, sir. Two of them: James and Lily Potter."

"Two?" she asked, showing far too much surprise. The Auror gave her a slightly suspicious look. "Only the Potters have a child," she blustered. "Wasn't his body found as well?"

The young man frowned. "No, sir. We scanned the rubble magically, and the Muggles have already found Lily Potter. She was found next to a child's bed, but it was empty. I'll contact the next of kin; perhaps the child was spending Halloween elsewhere, but there might have been a kidnapping--" He stopped abruptly; Umbridge had cast a silent *Petrificus*.

Dumbledore must have already taken the child! Blast that man! But this was merely another complication. She'd already staved off the truth by hiding the Master's body. The disappearance of this child would simply have to be obfuscated in a similar way. So Dumbledore would soon claim to have the Boy Who Defeated the Dark Lord. *Hem, hem.* What better way to discredit him than to claim that the Ministry had the boy? That would create plenty of confusion about the child, and the distrust would naturally spread to the accompanying story about Voldemort's death. Oh, it would all unravel in short order, but it would buy her some time. All she needed was another baby, and there were always plenty of those around.

She had to work fast, as the Polyjuice would be wearing off any minute. Umbridge stalked through the rescue effort with her hand inside her robes, implanting a phony memory in everyone there, Muggle and wizard alike, of the boy being found and rushed to St. Mungo's. It was crude, but no one would question it once they saw the boy in London.

By the time she finished the crew working the crime scene, she could feel the telltale tinglings of the Polyjuice wearing off. To her dismay, a small crowd of onlookers had accumulated, a row of dimly lit faces on the edge of the wreckage. Well, it didn't matter; they were late arrivals and would assume the baby had already been taken away by the time they showed up. She gave a stern, officious glance to the nearest bystanders (a little old man and someone who looked unsettlingly familiar but she couldn't quite place), and disappeared into the shadows to revert to her own face.

The Master had planned to visit the Longbottoms next. Umbridge smiled. They had a child that would suit perfectly. She Apparated to Lancashire and watched through their windows as they tidied up from a Halloween soiree. She waited until Alice was ensconced in the kitchen, carefully orchestrating a parade of dishes through the washing/rinsing/drying/stacking process. Knocking quietly so as not to be heard amongst the clanking tableware in the kitchen, she smiled politely at Frank Longbottom, then Stunned him as soon as he let her past their wards and into the house. Alice Longbottom never knew what hit her from behind, sending all their dishes crashing to the floor.

She needed some information before she could kill them, and it really ought to look like an accident. There simply wasn't time to do things properly right then and there. Confiscating their wands, she bound them with a *Petrificus* hex and cast a Silencing Spell around them in case they somehow managed to call for help. She'd deal with them later.

Wearing her own face, Umbridge made quite a show of arriving "straight from St. Mungo's" with the "Boy Who Lived." To her chagrin, rumors were already flying about Voldemort's death; apparently some Azkaban guards had seen the Dark Marks fade from the inmates. Cursing inwardly even as she beamed over the baby, she made a mental note to remove all non-Dementor personnel from Azkaban at her earliest convenience.

It was simply the worst night ever. The brat never stopped crying, even whimpering in his sleep. Millicent Bagnold, the Minister of Magic, was furthering her own agenda by

spreading the story of wild magic exploding from Godric's Hollow and the child being the only survivor, all of which took place at the same time the Dark Marks vanished in Azkaban. Before dawn, every sorcerer in the UK had heard an "Official Report" that Lord Voldemort was dead, brought down by a baby, and all of Umbridge's efforts to hide the truth were rendered useless. Meanwhile, she was stuck looking after a squalling brat instead of conscribing the last free Death Eaters into *her* service.

Dumbledore made absolutely no attempt to counter the claims in the *Daily Prophet*, but he hardly needed to! According to Bagnold, someone in MLE recognized that the brat wasn't the Potter's child, and she was most anxious to cover up the whole issue. Umbridge offered to take charge of "finding the poor dear's real home," before someone else recognized the boy as Neville Longbottom. Morgan le Fay, was ANYTHING going to proceed as expected? She scanned the Wizard Wireless as she drove back to Lancashire: not even a peep out of Dumbledore about the real Boy Who Lived. He was up to something, she was sure of it. She'd simply have to consult her sources at Hogwarts.

She sent an owl to Argus Filch asking him to meet her that afternoon in Hogsmeade. He knew of no infant in the castle, but noted that Hagrid was nowhere to be found. So that was it: the halfbreed giant must have Potter. But even Dumbledore wasn't loony enough to entrust a child permanently in Hagrid's care. No, Hagrid was merely the delivery boy, and he would be back. Umbridge smiled again. She would be waiting.

His hut was filthy and reeked of dirty, wet dog (which was unsurprising, given the presence of his slobbering, untrained puppy). She waited in the far corner, her wand pointed at the door. She grew tired and hungry, but the absolute nastiness of the place precluded any possibility of dining or napping. "He can't be too much longer," she sighed to herself whenever her stomach rumbled. She considered taking a bath in a tub full of bleach when this ordeal was over.

Despite sitting stiffly upright, she had managed to doze off when a great rumbling roar awoke her. Great Merlin's beard, Hagrid had returned on a motorbike! Chastising herself for falling asleep, she prepared once again for the difficult magic required to subdue a Giant. She had to cast three Dark spells before he'd even closed the front door, but it was enough to render him complacent.

He rambled obediently about where he'd been and what he'd done, even as she grew more and more agitated. Dumbledore had hidden the child with Muggles? Umbridge was a pureblood and had no idea how to find a child in the vast Muggle world, and of course the furry nitwit had tossed out the scrap of paper bearing the child's new address once he was finished with it. But Hagrid mentioned the boy's godfather, Sirius Black. He might know something useful.

She managed to partially Obliviate Hagrid's memories, but his cursed Giant blood was immune to the *Compescogito* spell. No matter: she was a good enough Obliviator to snip out the offending memories seamlessly. "There now. We won't have any other Death Eaters tracking down the Boy Who Lived," she chirped brightly at the addled gamekeeper, then flounced out of the cabin and took a breath of wonderfully clean air.

"*Hem, hem!* A motorcycle! They do seem such an exciting means of transportation, I must admit." A good ride in the crisp night air might be just the thing to blow away the grime of that horrid hut. She cast a *Reducto* charm until she could reach the handlebars and, after a few false starts and one near backflip, she soared skyward and headed for London.

It was easy enough to find Black, for he was already in custody of the Aurors. *How delightfully convenient*, she thought to herself with a prim smile. Black proved most informative after a bit of persuasion. Not only had the Master placed a Horcrux in the boy, Black had promptly destroyed it. "Interesting," she thought aloud as Black gasped for breath after the last *Cruciatius*. She had reckoned years earlier that the Dark Lord was making a Horcrux; she could think of no other reason he would have wanted a soulless child.

"But that didn't work out," she muttered to Black, though he couldn't possibly understand her point. "And with his flair for the dramatic, he would naturally want to save that Horcrux for an auspicious occasion. Such as the night he destroyed the enemy foretold to vanquish him."

She giggled, noting that Black was a rather good-looking young man, even more so than his brother Regulus (whom she had rarely seen without a mask anyway). He'd done her quite a favor by destroying the Horcrux, for now the Dark Lord was well and truly gone. "I do owe you my gratitude, Sirius," she admitted, stroking his hair even though it was soaked with sweat. "You've left things very tidy for me. I probably ought to kill you, but you know, I don't think I shall. You *are* Potter's godfather, and you could be a helpful influence in his future. No, I think we'll just tuck you away in Azkaban for the time being."

Patting him on the cheek, she took up her wand to lock down his memories of her little interrogation. "Plus, if I'm lucky," she added, "your mother will die from the shame--now wouldn't that be a bonus?"

With her role in events safely removed from history, all that remained was disposing of the Master's corpse. She rode the motorbike home to keep as a souvenir, then returned to Godric's Hollow in the Ministry auto she'd hidden in her garage. "*Mobilicorpus!*" she said, levitating James Potter and dumping him unceremoniously into his wife's casket. It wasn't likely that anyone would ever look for the Master in the grave of his last victim!

The air in the trunk was even fouler than Hagrid's cabin; the great Lord Voldemort was already succumbing to decay. Plucking some of the Potters' funerary flowers to make a quick nosegay, she tucked what was left of her Dark Lord into the coffin and paused to bid her final farewell. "Poor dear," she said, arranging his hands as best she could into a dignified pose. "Though you hardly need this anymore, and it would make a fine memento of our years together," she added, plucking the wand from his cold fingers. *Might as well have this too*, she thought, slipping off the signet ring of Salazar Slytherin, though she ignored the other one, the one he mysteriously called the "Sigil of Khamul." It was obviously an antique, but was otherwise worthless, especially compared to the ring of a founder of Hogwarts.

When Ondossi recovered from their last exploration, her first words were, "If I spend one more minute in her tweaked little brain, I'm going to strangle her from the inside out."

Umbridge was Voldemort's best kept secret: his deepest mole in the Ministry and the one who preserved his wand and ring during the Dark Years, but he didn't trust her any further than he could throw her. All their hours of Legilimency had solved but a few historical mysteries (and confirmed the names of some suspected Death Eaters). They'd learned that the inmates from Azkaban had been sent to the Master's stronghold in Siberia, but Umbridge herself had never been there and did not know the location.

Harry nodded. "Not much point," he agreed. "What to do with her now, you think? We can hardly send her to Azkaban."

"I'd turn her over to the Centaurs," said Tura. "She hates them even more than I do."

"Not up to you two, unfortunately," said Percy Weasley from his armchair across the room, where he had been "officially observing" the interrogations on behalf of the Ministry of Magic. "Father's already made arrangements. When you're finished with her, she'll be deported to South America and locked up in their Wizard prison, somewhere in the Amazon rainforest. I've been doing a bit of reading, it's actually quite interesting: The prisoners survive on food they find themselves. There aren't any supplies shipped in. Apparently there are plenty of insects to go around."

If anyone else were speaking, this might have sounded sadistic, but to Percy, it was just another fascinating example of cost-effective management policies. Harry smirked, but Tura looked almost jealous. "I bet they have great fruit all the time, too," she grumbled. "Though having to fight the wildlife for it probably gets old." She glared murderously at Umbridge. "I hope you get malaria."

Harry laughed humorlessly. "You can have her back in Ministry custody Percy. Knock yourself out."

"Focus, Harry!" shouted Ron from the Keeper's post. "Don't leave it to Elias to protect you; we can't afford all the fouls!"

Harry shuddered and tossed his head, trying to center himself. This was his last Quidditch match, after all, Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff. His last opportunity to compete in the comfortable world of sports, where losses only meant a glum return to the common room, not death or despair. But try as he might, Harry couldn't keep his mind on the game.

Riding around the stadium on his broomstick had taken on a new meaning since Christmastime. He thought constantly of the way it felt to fly with Tura pressed against his back, her arms tight around his waist. He spotted her in the crowd without meaning to and awkwardly avoided that entire section of the bleachers for the rest of the match. Watching him fly surely stirred up painful memories for her too. And if that weren't enough, he was also stuck with the memory of Dolores Umbridge soaring on Sirius's motorbike and enjoying the wind whipping through her hair, just as it did when he rode his Firebolt. It was enough to put him off flying for life.

Another Bludger whizzed past his head, this one even closer than the last. He veered off toward the periphery of the pitch, hoping it might be a little more peaceful than the central zone. *Where's that stupid Snitch?* he wondered ruefully. Once Quidditch was played with a live bird, the Golden Snidge, but they'd been replaced with the enchanted ball when the poor birds nearly went extinct. A shame, for if it were a little bird now, Harry would have used Legilimency to locate it, just to get this over with.

Madam Hooch's whistle interrupted his brooding. She was waving a penalty flag and pointing at him. Swooping to midfield on his broomstick, he braced for an argument. "I didn't do anything! What's the foul?"

Madam Hooch stared at him briefly, then laughed. "Get your game on, Potter. Look up, and you'll see your *fowl!*" Harry soon understood her little joke; a scarlet phoenix was hovering silently about six meters above his head.

"Fawkes!" he cried in exasperation. "Go on! You're not allowed on the pitch!" Naturally, his familiar took that as an invitation to alight on the handle of his Firebolt. "No, no!" Harry admonished, shaking his finger in Fawkes's face. The phoenix promptly poked out his yellow tongue and wagged it insolently as he tightened his grip. Harry grimaced and gazed imploringly at Madam Hooch. "I'll need a time-out," he said sheepishly.

"Rules, lad," she answered sternly. "You've got one minute to see him off, or it'll be a foul for illegal defense." Harry nodded gratefully and zipped off to the boundary of the pitch.

"All right, I'll pay attention!" he told Fawkes, gently trying to push his feathery rump off the broom handle. "Merlin's knickers, you're as bad as Krum. Now give over. If you stay on the field they'll get penalty shots. That'll make the game last even longer, you know."

Fawkes stretched his long neck to nuzzle Harry's cheek with his bill. "Oh, none of that," Harry said, embarrassed by the tender gesture in front of the entire stadium. "I promise I'll get my head in the game. Promise! No more near misses! Now go roost! Go!"

With a final glare of reproach, Fawkes shook his tail and flapped off to perch atop a flagpole where he obviously intended to spend the rest of the match. Harry turned to Madam Hooch and pointed his thumb at the new spectator. She looked displeased, but shrugged and nodded; as long as he was off the field, Fawkes, too, was entitled to watch the game. In the meantime, the stands had erupted with comments ranging from affectionate cooing to jeers questioning Harry's masculinity. Fortunately the latter (mostly male students) were soon silenced by the indignant reactions of the former (mostly female). It was always open season to pick on Harry Potter, but Fawkes had won the heart of every girl in the castle.

Harry concentrated in earnest after play resumed, but before long his thoughts strayed again. His final match, his final year at Hogwarts... perhaps his final *everything*. *I've never written a will!* he realized with a start. *Not that it matters.* If he perished in the final battle, all his worldly goods would surely end up in Voldemort's coffers.

Something whooshed past his ear, bringing him back to the present. Thankfully it wasn't Fawkes, just Elias. He smacked away a Bludger making a beeline for Harry from above, then let his broom drop abruptly to fly side-by-side. "Waerkin' me ta the boon today, Harry!" he said cheerfully, then zipped off to hassle a Hufflepuff Chaser.

After the game, Harry lurked in the changing rooms until the rest of the team departed. He'd spotted a large black dog observing the game from Ondossi's sleeping porch, and if Sirius meant to find him, he'd rather be in private than in the common room. A familiar scratching of claws soon announced his godfather's presence.

"A bit off today, eh, lad?" said Sirius after he morphed, locking the door to the changing room.

Harry's shoulders drooped. "I caught the Snitch, didn't I?" he said crossly.

Nodding a bit reluctantly, Sirius gave him a warm hug. "Indeed, that's what matters. Only I usually see you smiling out there."

"Yeah," said Harry. "That's getting harder and harder of late."

Sirius relaxed on the bench in the center of the room. Siberia clearly agreed with him; he looked cheerful and fit, undoubtedly the result of having a useful task within the Order and getting plenty of fresh air. But his gray eyes were filled with concern. "I reckon it is," he said somberly, then a brief silence fell.

"How's the hunt?" Harry asked.

"Slow," Sirius said. "There's three of us at it--all Animagi, you know. Reem figured the wards were probably tuned to humans, what with all the wildlife out there. Voldemort would quickly get tired of the drain on his magic every time a herd of reindeer sauntered over the perimeter."

"Makes sense," Harry said, recalling the pristine wilderness in Draco's memory. "Did you hear I found your motorbike?"

Sirius's eyes lit up briefly and he laughed. "No joke? Well, well, well. The last time I rode it wasn't exactly pleasant, but I *have* missed it now and then. Where was it?"

"Umbridge's garden shed."

The smile on his godfather's face transformed to a scowl. "Great Mother of Merlin!" he spat. "That bike was a bloody brilliant piece of machinery! That just..." Sirius lapsed into an incoherent growl at the thought of his chopper trapped among a traitor's old flowerpots and fake flamingos.

"There it is, then," said Harry matter-of-factly. "Once your name's been cleared, you'll have to restore it to its rightful glory and take it out for a victory lap."

That put a broad smile on his face. "Funny you should mention that. You'll want to take a good look at tomorrow's *Prophet*." Harry broke into a surprised grin of his own. "Struth! Arthur needs something to distract from the disappearance of our Ms. Umbridge, and this fits the bill nicely. Sensational and all that."

Harry whooped, leaping to his feet to hug his godfather, then sat back, shaking his head. "It's eerie, thinking of Mr. Weasley working the press."

"Eh, can't let the bad guys have all the fun!" Sirius said with a smirk. "And this is such the perfect story. After it starts to fade, he can ramp it up again by revealing not only am I not guilty, I'm also not dead! Old Arthur couldn't invent better gossip than this."

Harry's eyes welled up, and he clasped his godfather's shoulders once more.

The controversy was certainly everything Mr. Weasley could have hoped for, judging by the reactions in the Great Hall. Ron and Ginny were constantly interrupted from their toast and jam to either defend Percy's integrity, or to accept congratulations on his behalf. Harry, too, received his share of odd looks, for Percy had revealed all the evidence he'd collected, including the fact that Harry was Black's godson.

"But third year! Look what he did to the Fat Lady's portrait!" said Dean Thomas as they all walked to Charms.

"He wasn't after me, though!" said Harry. "He was trying to kill that rat Pettigrew. If you'd just spent twelve years in Azkaban while the real murderer was right behind her portrait, you might lose your temper, too, what?"

Dean looked skeptical. "I seem to remember you were as scared of him as the rest of us."



"Yeah, that's right," Harry said, carefully keeping his anger in check. "But then I learned the *truth*." He gave Dean a stern look, wondering if he was going to have to individually convince every person he knew that Sirius was trustworthy.

Fortunately Mr. Weasley (or more correctly, Fleur Delacour Weasley) understood that one round of news wasn't enough to convince many people of Sirius's innocence. The *Daily Prophet* began featuring regular interviews with members of the Order of the Phoenix, all of whom mentioned Sirius at least once in the article. By the middle of May, Sirius Black had gone from demon to angel, murderer to martyr.

Harry, in the meantime, was beginning to realize that there just *might* be a chance that he'd have to take his N.E.W.T.s. He had already become the only seventh-year who didn't spend every waking hour with his nose in a book. Even Ron was taking his studies seriously. "Not like you need to worry," he chided Harry in the common room one evening as he flipped through his favorite DADA manual while the others pored over Theories of Transfiguration. "How can they even give you exams anymore, I'd like to know? All you have to do is look up from your parchment and the answers appear over everyone's heads, don't they?"

Though Ron hadn't meant it as an insult, it rubbed Harry the wrong way. "Well, sort of, yeah," he sulked. "But I'm not a cheater, you know--it's not like I'd do it on purpose."

Hermione, who had worked herself up into a tense frenzy rivalled only by the weeks before their O.W.L.s, glared up from her textbook and snapped, "Then *why* aren't you studying, Harry?"

He knew she was just venting a little stress, so he kept his voice soft when he replied, "Because I remember what the Sorting Hat said. Even if I manage to sit the N.E.W.T.s, I'll be too broken or too dead to get the scores back."

Hermione's hand flew to cover her mouth and she looked up at him in horror. "It's okay, Hermione," he said gently.

"Harry, I'm so sorry I--"

"Shh. I mean it, really, it's all right. You always come unglued before exams," he tried to joke, but it didn't take. Harry lowered his head briefly; it was hard to see her guilt and grief. "Honestly, it's what I'm here for. I should've died sixteen years ago--everything since then, all this, has been a bonus."

Far from comforting his friends, there suddenly wasn't a dry eye around the table. *Great, now I've just upset them further*, he mused, but an idea began to expand in his mind as he took in the situation. They were virtually done with Hogwarts--the rest of the term would be spent reviewing and preparing for N.E.W.T.s. He'd played his last Quidditch match. There were still certain things he couldn't do with Legilimency, but he understood his magic enough to know that there was nothing he could do to rush those last few skills. They'd come to him or not in the time he had left; he could learn no more from Ondossi.

It was time, Harry Potter realized as he gazed around the table at the pained faces of his friends, to leave Hogwarts.

He did it that night, packing his trunk as the others studied downstairs in the common room. Harry sat one more time on the bed that had been his for seven years, and looked around the room that was his first real home. Fawkes had flown out the window a few minutes earlier and returned with Hedwig. She flapped over to Harry's lap to alight on his leg with no sassing whatsoever and nudged him with her head. "Going to meet me at Grimmauld Place?" he asked shakily, rubbing the tiny feathers on her chin. "Don't need to mail something to myself this time?" Hedwig hooted sadly, then hopped to the windowsill and disappeared into the twilight.

"I'm not really up for a round of goodbyes," Harry confessed to his familiar. "Shall we just go?" An image of Professor McGonagall, her face red as a beet, popped unbidden into his mind, and Harry nodded. "All right, Fawkes," he grumbled quietly. "I'll leave a note."

Harry took out a parchment and quill, and after several false starts that ended in scribbling and then Vanishing the ink, finally composed a message:

*To all of you,*

*I saw tonight that it's time for me to move on. You all have exams to study for, and at this point all I can do is distract you. This is where I should pause dramatically, then say, "I shall be tested in other ways." Ha Ha.*

*Fawkes and I are going straight to Headquarters, so don't worry about me. Especially Viktor--I'll square things up with Remus first thing. I want you to stay here and see to Hermione until exams are over. But don't tell her I said that. Of course, she's probably the one reading this aloud to everyone, so chances are, I'm already in the doghouse.*

*Please don't be upset that I didn't come down to say goodbye. It was just too hard. Besides, I'm only leaving Hogwarts--you all are still my friends. You know where to come and find me when it's your time to leave as well.*

*Harry*

He folded the parchment in half and left it on Ron's pillow, but he stopped in mid-turn and picked it back up to add a final thought:

*P.S. If I don't make it, remember I love you all.*

Harry stared at the parchment for a long time before setting his jaw and Vanishing the last line.

Fawkes warbled mournfully at him, but Harry put the note back down and picked up his trunk. "They need to be thinking about their exams right now, not fretting about whether they'll see me alive again," he told his familiar. "Their N.E.W.T.s are important--they have to prepare for their future." Harry scoffed. "Not like me."

## 41: Gathering Momentum

*Chapter 41 of 50*

Many loose ends are suddenly tied together, and the Order prepares for the final battle.

They arrived at the courtyard of Grimmauld Place in a burst of phoenix fire. It was the only way to "Apparate" from Hogwarts, but it was embarrassingly flamboyant, and

Harry was definitely in a "low-key" mood. "That's what we'll work on next, Fawkes: Apparating together. Should've done it ages ago, after you charbroiled Draco." Fawkes peered at him sharply, a clear reminder of exactly whose idea *that* had been.

Before any further discussion could commence, a dozen sorcerers flooded the courtyard with wands at the ready. "'S all right," boomed the voice of Mad-Eye Moody from the back of the crowd. "'S Potter. Pity people won't listen once in a while, before charging off half-cocked." Sheepish greetings issued forth from the others as they put their wands away.

Lupin was waiting for him just inside the door. "Don't even start, I'm doing everything the proper way," Harry said, displaying his trunk. "I came straight here. There's nothing left to do at Hogwarts except study for exams." Remus frowned, but Harry raised his hand for silence. "And don't start on that either, I'm not going to waste two perfectly good weeks reviewing the finer points of Advanced Conjuring. We're here to stay." Harry rumbled Fawkes's belly in a silent plea for solidarity.

The frown remained a few more seconds, then Lupin shrugged. "Dinner's on the table. You know where your room is." Only after Harry's eyes bugged out in surprise did he smile. "Welcome home, Harry."

There weren't any crews of house-elves manning the Headquarters kitchens, and Harry had eaten with the Weasley clan enough times to know that while good things might come to those who wait, second helpings generally went to those who hustled. He raced to the kitchen as soon as his trunk was put away. Tonks budged over to make room for him at the long table and Summoned him a plate of stew as she planted one of her infamous lipstick smooches on his cheek. "Wotcher, Harry?" she said cheerily.

"Been better," he admitted, dunking a roll in the broth, but did not elaborate. Fortunately there seemed to be little need, as there was a tense silence around the table. Others finished their meals and left, but when Harry scraped his spoon along the bottom of the bowl, Tonks kicked him in the shin before he could push back from the table.

She really got him, too, and he had to turn a yelp into a cough. She tipped her head at Lupin, who was conferring quietly with a couple of unknown witches in the corner, but she hardly needed to bother. Once Harry recovered from the shock of having his shinbone dented, he'd skimmed her thoughts to find out what he'd done to deserve such treatment. Lupin had something important to talk about, but not for the whole group to hear.

Mad-Eye Moody clunked his way downstairs and parked across from Harry with a knowing look, slowly peeling an orange he'd pulled from a pocket of his robes. When the last diner had patted their tummy contentedly and departed, Lupin bade the witches good luck and sent them upstairs. He sat beside Harry and even pushed Harry's dinner bowl away so he could lean in close. He gave Tonks an apologetic look, and she smiled thinly and left as well.

"For pity's sake, Reem, do you want me to just read you, so you don't have to say it out loud?"

That made Lupin snicker. "That'd be rather rude to Alastor, I think. Besides, I'd rather tell it, if it's all the same to you. Only we've found it, Harry. Voldemort's fortress."

"Mother of Merlin!"

"I *know*, Harry. It's not quite done--one of the scouts discovered the wards last night. Persian fellow, transforms into a camel. All three scouts are inside the wards doing reconnaissance. They'll be reporting in a matter of hours."

Harry fought the urge to leap to his feet. "Then what?"

"The part I've been dreading. We review their findings and plan our attack. We've got several strategies laid out, but Harry! We're still short a Horcrux! Not to mention we haven't destroyed the ones we DO have." Lupin buried his face in his hands with a heavy sigh. "I've spent a year thinking about this day, and I still don't know what to do."

Moody patted Lupin on the shoulders with a gruff sort of tenderness. "You're not alone in it, lad," he reminded him. "Arthur'll be here the minute the scouts report, and we'll get Minerva down from Hogwarts."

"Ondossi, too," said Harry. "If anyone knows that terrain, it's her," he added hastily, but in truth he suddenly wanted her with him. Not to protect her--if anything, it would likely be the other way around, that she would save his neck yet again. *I can do this if she's with me*, he realized with a guilty pang. *I can die if I have to, to save her*. It wasn't a comforting thought, but it was an honest one and it warmed his chest far more deeply than the hot stew.

Though it was still mid-evening, Harry went up to his room and flopped onto his bed without even lighting a candle. He wished he could sleep. *Moody'd approve of that*, he smiled to himself as he watched the shadows of tree limbs whisk across the ceiling.

He had dozed off despite the early hour, when he was treated to the bellowing voice of Phineas Nigellus Black. "Potter! You're wanted in the drawing room."

Harry literally launched from the bed, then sat back on it a moment to get his bearings. "You needn't shout, you know," he grouched, patting his feet around the floor to find his shoes. "I'm not deaf!"

"Oh, begging your pardon," oozed the portrait without a drop of sincerity. "I spent my evening convincing Minerva McGonagall that you were safe and sound, and not to wring your bloody neck for dashing off *yet again*. And now I've been sent to roust you from your beauty sleep. I don't know when I became the errand boy for a werewolf, Potter, but I'm quite certain I don't like it."

"You don't fool me," Harry snapped. "You love being right in the thick of it." The portrait's teeth gnashed shut with an audible click.

The drawing room was still layered in dust, but the fireplace had been rebuilt and Arthur Weasley was climbing out of it. Professors McGonagall and Ondossi were already there, with a tall, slender witch about Lupin's age. Her skin was so dark it looked almost blue, and her hair coiled into tiny springs all over her head. Another unknown wizard, wrapped in a blanket, huddled with Lupin over a mug of steaming tea. He had the longest eyelashes Harry had ever seen, and he knew this must be the camel fellow.

"We waited, but there was no sign of him," he was saying to Lupin. "Ogetchi flew back and scouted for him, but she's a crane, not an eagle; she can't spot from height like some birds."

A tightness gripped Harry's throat as he realized who was missing from the scene. "You lost Sirius?" he said.

Lupin put a reassuring hand on his forearm. "Padfoot smelled something and went back toward the compound. It doesn't mean anything's wrong--he'll investigate it, then he'll catch up." Harry glared skeptically and skimmed Lupin's thoughts, but the older wizard wasn't trying to deceive him; he truly wasn't worried about Sirius. Yet.

Mr. Weasley looked unconcerned as well. "He's doing his job, Harry. He's the only one of this group who even comes close to blending in out there. Not many camels in Siberia!" He patted the shivering wizard on the back, who looked up from his tea with an abashed grin.

They Transfigured the desk into a low, flat table, and spent the next few hours sketching maps and discussing tactics, numbers, spells, and statistics, at a depth that would have made Professor Binns weep for joy. Try as he might, Harry could barely follow their arguments; for the first time he wished he'd stayed awake during History of Magic, if only for the practice. Despite his intimate study of wand-to-wand combat, he had no grasp of how an offensive was waged by large numbers of wizards.

He also found it harder to concentrate, the longer his godfather was absent from the proceedings.

Eventually Harry caught Ondossi's eye and tipped his head toward the door. She followed him down to the kitchen where they both slumped at the long table. "Man, I'm glad those guys are around to think about the 'big picture' stuff," she said. "Makes my head spin."

Harry nodded. "I don't like the way every single tactic involves people getting hurt." He gnawed the inside of his lip. Tura surprised him by offering her hand and he took it automatically. And immediately realized his mistake, for she was deep in his mind in an instant.

"Not all alone, you won't," she said flatly.

She'd seen what he was pondering: that this was his battle, his war to fight, and he'd rather creep up on Voldemort by himself than watch his friends cut a swath through the Dark Army. But Legilimency worked both ways, and their hands were still touching. Sending a pulse of magic into her arm, he read her intent as well.

"You mean to come with me."

She snatched her hand away. "Rascal," she grumbled. "Well, that *is* my territory, and you'll have a long walk through it. I can find food so we can travel light, and without magic--he'll be able to detect it inside the wards."

Harry didn't bother to disguise the relief and gladness in his face. "Sold. Let's do it, I'm ready."

Tura scoffed as though expecting more resistance from him. "Well! I guess you are, Mr. Sneak Off Without Saying Goodbye! Not this time, though--the Order's gotta know what we're doing. Otherwise they'll come charging after us and it'll get messy."

"They'll try to stop us in the first place if we tell them," argued Harry.

"Yep. They will," she said. "But we're part of the team now, Harry. The Seekers. We'll present our strategy, and we'll persuade them to go with it." She winked. "I think we can make them see the light."

"I'll be back in the morning," she said, rising from the table and tossing a pinch of Floo Powder into the fireplace. "I'll get Viktor to take over my classes, they're all review at this point anyway. Get a good night's sleep, Harry. We'll start in two days, maybe three."

She stepped into the Floo and disappeared before he could voice his surprise. *Two days.* Harry swallowed hard. Finding the last Horcrux first suddenly seemed like a brilliant idea.

Occupied by thoughts of setting out so soon on his final quest, Harry stared at the fire until he realized that for some time, there had been a considerable commotion upstairs. Sprinting from the kitchen, he found the drawing room crowd milling about on the landing and Lupin tromping down from the floor above with a fierce grin. "What is it?" said Harry.

"Sirius is back," said Lupin. "With a prisoner. Upstairs."

Harry's jaw dropped. "Who?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange."

Lupin refused to let him confront her, at least not until Sirius had a go at it. "He wants to talk to her, Harry. She's still his cousin. He thinks if she learns that Regulus turned before the end, she might recant. Or if she hears what happened to Draco."

Lupin sighed heavily and shrugged. "For what it's worth, I told him she's a lost cause, but you know how he can be. Stubborn git," he added wistfully, as if sorry in advance for his friend's imminent disappointment. In the end Harry just went to bed, knowing that there would be much to do in the morning. If Sirius extracted any news, he'd learn it soon enough.

He woke before dawn and, unsurprisingly, couldn't fall back to sleep. The house was quiet, but there was a hint of muffled conversation upstairs. Sirius must have been arguing with Bellatrix Lestrange all night. Harry went down to the kitchen and fixed a platter of toast and tea, then brought it up to the fifth floor bedroom. Even through the door, his godfather didn't sound angry, but defeated.

Sirius positively beamed as Harry came in with the breakfast tray. "Good morning, lad. I've been trying to reason with my cousin. Thought she might help us with that one missing piece of the puzzle." Harry nodded meaningfully: if anyone knew the location of the last Horcrux, it would be Bellatrix. "Sadly, she won't talk to me, but I reckon she'll answer to you."

Baring her teeth, Bellatrix spat at Harry. "Oh, that's rich, that is, you mongrel. Do you honestly think I'll sing a song for ickle Potty?"

"Oh, you'll sing, all right," Harry informed her sharply. "And the more you fight, the worse it'll be." Despite his cold words, he offered her a cup of tea, unsurprised when she batted it to the floor.

"Bring it on, filth. You don't frighten me."

Harry's smile was like a blade of ice. She might be Draco's "Aunt Bella," but he hated this woman and intended to show her the extent of his power. As he prepared to force his way into her mind, however, footsteps were pounding up the stairs. Breaking open Lestrange would leave him numb for hours, so he ground his teeth impatiently and waited for whatever news this latest messenger might bring. He had time, after all.

Ondossi burst into the bedroom and scanned all of them wildly, then, with a look of relief, bent forward to catch her breath. "Leave us," she panted. Sirius wasn't thrilled about being ordered around in his own home, but he shoved his captive into an armchair and stalked out. Tura gave him a grateful nod as he passed. "You too, Harry," she said.

"WHAT?"

She raised a hand to silence him, but he was too shocked to continue anyway. *Don't argue in front of the prisoner,* she projected angrily. *Just go. I'm doing the interrogation.*

*What? No! I'm totally ready for this, Tura, I want to--*

*I know you are. But not this time. PLEASE, Harry. Go! I'll explain later.* Her eyes, her whole stance was painfully familiar, the same she'd held that night on her platform as she begged him to leave without her secret. His stomach seemed to fall right to the floor.

"Fine," he fumed quietly as he shuffled past her.

He nearly tripped over Sirius as he rounded the first bend in the stairs. Harry smiled and sat beside him immediately, for his godfather was playing out an Extendable Ear. "Three cheers to Fred and George," Sirius whispered, huddling close and holding the tiny end of the string between their heads. "I wouldn't be caught dead without these things anymore."

"Hello, pretty lady." It was Tura's voice, calm and even. Both wizards gaped at one another. "Do you know me?" she continued.

When Bellatrix spoke, her voice was unlike Harry had ever heard, soft and deferential, perhaps even afraid. "I don't... but your eyes..." She fell silent a moment, then gasped. "His daughter?"

Harry yanked the Extendable Ear from his godfather's hand.

"Whose daughter?" sputtered Sirius, but when he saw Harry's expression, he closed his mouth and swallowed hard. "I don't really want to know, do I?"

Harry stared at his feet, then risked a quick glance at Sirius's thoughts. He'd guessed, of course. Before Harry could turn away, he saw the comprehension in his godfather's eyes; there were no secrets between them. "Mother of Merlin!" Sirius whispered.

"Listen!" Harry pleaded, gripping the older wizard's shoulders. "How many times has she helped me? Saved me? I trust her."

"Harry," began Sirius, but simply shook his head, at a loss to continue.

Harry took advantage of the silence. "I *know* her, Sirius. He murdered her mother. He tried to poison her, before she was even born. She may be his child, but she's not *his*."

Sirius leaned back. "Then what's she doing in there with Bellatrix?" He eyed the Extendable Ear pointedly. Harry had pinched the end shut. He moistened his lips and took a quick, deep breath, then released the pressure and held it between them once again. There was nothing to hear but an occasional whimper.

"She's in her mind already," Harry sighed. "We'll have to wait til they're finished. You know she can only tell the truth afterward, when she's numb."

Sirius nodded, his jaw set firm. "Good, then. We'll have a talk."

The stairs grew hard and uncomfortable as they waited on the landing, with sounds of awakening drifting up softly from the lower floors. When the bedroom door finally creaked open, Sirius looked up, drawing his wand. At least he didn't point it up the stairs as though planning to hex Tura at first sight, but it still made Harry cringe. "Easy," he said, putting a hand on his godfather's wrist. Sirius glared at him, but held the wand down against his thigh.

Surprisingly, Ondossi managed to navigate the staircase, but she was definitely in a daze. She walked right between the two wizards without seeming to notice them until Harry tugged her hand, whereupon she plopped unconcernedly onto the landing between them.

"I thought we'd have to carry you out of there," Harry noted.

"She opened her mind willingly," Tura murmured. "Much easier."

Sirius glared pointedly. "Why would she do that, Ondossi?"

Tura let her head fall back to look up at him. "I made her feel safe."

"Trusts you, does she?" Sirius growled, raising his wand a few inches. "Why?"

"She trusts *blood*, Sirius Black. That she trusts mine suited my purpose."

Sirius barely concealed the hostility in his voice. "And what purpose was that?"

Harry grappled with the urge to deck his own godfather, but Tura was completely unperturbed. She held his gaze and answered him serenely. "She loves my father, Sirius. So did my mother at one time. I wanted to understand this."

Her gaze unfocused and she began slowly sinking onto the landing as though deflating. Harry put his arm behind her shoulder, staring coldly at his godfather. Sirius bowed his head, then peeked back up at Harry contritely. "I'll get her other side," he finally said, and scooted across the landing to drape Tura's arm around his neck.

Together they carried her to Harry's third-floor bedroom, where they managed to maneuver her limp form into the bed. As they untangled themselves from her soggy limbs and stood to depart, she said, "Make the announcement, Harry. We leave for Siberia tomorrow."

Shrugging, Harry picked up her feet, dangling over the edge of the bed, and placed them on top of it with the rest of her. Sirius waited until they were in the drawing room before speaking. "She wasn't joking, eh?" Harry shook his head. "Well," shrugged Sirius, "that's one way of getting out of your N.E.W.T.s."

"Making the announcement" was not a simple matter. After all her talk the night before about the two of them persuading the team, that chore was left largely to Harry. "Because it's stupid to mount a large-scale attack!" he railed to a double row of faces at the long table. "I'm 'the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord!' Exactly how will getting half the Order *slaughtered* help *my* mission? Seems to me sneaking in with the element of surprise will get me a lot closer to Voldemort than riding a wave of wizards throwing hexes left and right!"

Being a Legilimagus had never seemed so useful, since Harry could lightly scan each of them for their protests and form a rebuttal before they had time to speak. "I won't be alone. Tura's coming with me. No offense, but I dare say the two of us can handle the Dark Army much better than you lot." He proved his point by pulling a little stunt Tura had taught him over the spring holidays, a burst of magic across a certain tiny region of the brain, which short-circuited their consciousness. One row of the table slumped forward, sound asleep, as Harry nodded meaningfully at the slackjawed sorcerers on the opposite side. It made him go numb, but he remained standing with his arms folded, then quietly noted, "I rest my case." He left the room with a dignified stride as though he confident he'd made his point, but in truth he knew he'd go limp and start babbling if he stayed any longer.

The hard sell, however, began when Ron and Hermione showed up after lunch. "You know, for a secret society, news travels fast around here," Harry groaned as they barged into his room without knocking.

"It hardly took a genius to figure it out!" barked Hermione.

"Have to be daft to miss it," Ron agreed. "We've sneaked off with you too many times not to know the signs, mate."

Sighing, Harry sat back on his bed and indicated they should do the same. "All right, you caught me. And I'm glad, because I wouldn't want to leave without saying goodbye." The words gumbled up his throat as his eyes welled with unexpected tears.

Ron shook his head. "No goodbyes here. We're in this together." His voice was firm and confident, but he glanced anxiously at Hermione, who was teary-eyed as well. She held out her hands and Harry took them.

"Remember that troll in the bathroom first year?" Hermione began. Each of them chuckled at the memory. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she said in a fair imitation of Ron's terrified squeak that Halloween night seven years earlier. "And Godric's Hollow? Professor Moody said we'd make great Aurors." She paused and looked him firmly in the eye. "We've always been a team, Harry. How can we let you go off alone *now*?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "I can't believe I even have to answer this. Hello! *I'm* the marked one. Not 'one of the three.' Come on, I just told the entire Order I'd be going without them. There's no way I'd let *you two* tag along!"

For a disconcerting moment, Harry was quite sure Hermione was going to slap him, but she took a deep breath and her features calmed again. "If you think you can drive us away with insulting words, you really don't know much about friendship, Harry James Potter," she said coolly.

"Ouch," he said aloud, then sighed. "Okay, that was a cheap shot. But the point remains, I'm going alone. With Tura," he amended somewhat shyly, making Ron break into a broad smirk. Harry folded his arms stubbornly. "Even Remus agrees it's foolish to send anyone else; I'll either make it or I won't, no matter how many people come along

for the ride."

"That's all fine and good once you reach the keep, but what happens if you get captured before then?" snapped Ron. "Or you could get eaten by a bloody bear in your sleep or something, for the love of Merlin!"

"Oh, please," Harry grumbled. "The whole point of going in is that we *want* to end up in front of Voldemort. As for the other, well, either me or Tura can make any bear change its mind about how tasty we look."

Ron opened his mouth for another argument, but Hermione silenced him with a wave of her hand. "So that's it, then? You don't need us anymore, Harry?" she asked calmly.

That really stung. Harry stared at her blankly for a moment, but Hermione wouldn't blink. "You of all people know better than that," he finally said. "Of course I need you. I need you not to get killed." His voice was growing thick, so he stopped to clear his throat. "Do you understand? I need you to *make it*. I already know I won't. I have two choices: broken or dead. But I can save *you*. You and everybody else I care about. That's why you can't come with me. I need to know that *you'll be all right*."

Hermione burst into tears. Ron slumped at last into a chair with a look of dazed resignation, patting Hermione on the back. "That's... that was... pretty noble, Harry. I mean..." He met Harry's gaze while shaking his head gently, clearly at a loss for words.

"Don't worry about it, Ron," Harry chided softly, a bit surprised by his own outburst. "It's just the way things are." They both sat quietly on either side of Hermione, draping their arms across her shoulders. Finally Harry rested his chin against the side of her head. "I know," he piped up. "I still have that cell phone. I can take it with me--it's not magic."

Hermione sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. They don't work in the wilderness. They have to be near a transmission tower." She gave his knee a little squeeze. "It was a good thought, though, Harry."

"I have those now and then," he agreed with a wan smile.

Lupin did a double-take upon walking into the bedroom. "There you are! Have you been in here all afternoon?"

Harry nodded without looking up. He lay prone upon his bed, sandwiching his pillow between his feet as he browsed the pages of the ancient red book he'd found in Godric's Hollow. The words meant nothing to him, though some of them teased the edges of his mind as though they wanted to be read. But there were also maps that intrigued him, and drawings of marvelous weapons and scenery. He'd never really had a chance to take a good look at it, and he was all too aware he might never get another chance.

Lupin came over to see what was occupying him so intently, then sat on the edge of the bed. "The mystery book, then?" Again Harry nodded without taking his eyes from the page. "Beautiful runes," Lupin commented. Harry flipped the pages back to a spot he'd found earlier, a drawing of an elegant sword styled like a long leaf, with runes inscribed along the blade. Lupin hummed in appreciation.

"Arthur wants Sirius to personally deliver Bellatrix Lestrange into Auror custody," he said presently, as though announcing the post had arrived.

That got Harry's attention! He rose immediately to his knees and nearly grabbed the older wizard by the shoulders. "What?"

Lupin chuckled. "It's true; he just owed us with the request. Sirius will look so much the better for capturing a Death Eater. Alice Longbottom insists she's well enough to attend; she's still an Auror, technically speaking, and wants to make the official arrest."

"When? I'm going too," said Harry, slamming the book shut and stuffing it absently into a deep pocket of his robes.

"I thought you might want to. But the prevailing mood is that it would be better for Siri to go it alone. I've been told to skip it, too, you see. Arthur wants him to come in out of the wilderness with this prisoner in tow, so it doesn't look like the Order's been secretly harboring him all this time. Which of course we *have*, but we've also been claiming he was dead. Which he *was*, but not in the absolute sense. It's rather tricky, isn't it?"

Harry snorted. "I get it, Reem. Whatever it takes to keep the *Prophet* from accusing the Order of conspiring to hide an innocent fugitive."

"Precisely," Lupin sighed. "But I thought you might like to join us in the drawing room, because Sirius left twenty minutes ago to 'dirty up' a bit before he parades into the Ministry. Adora and I are going to listen to the wireless."

Harry's eyes bugged out, and with a huge grin he bounded out of bed and raced Remus down the stairs.

"Nothing yet," said Tonks, sitting next to the wooden case and fiddling with the tuner. "It's all music right now, no news. But one of them's bound to interrupt the program sooner or later." She continued to twist the dial impatiently between stations, scowling harder and harder until she gave up with a scoff and took out her wand. "I don't know why they make these things so you can only hear one station at a time," she growled, slouching back in her chair and adjusting the dial magically. Harry furrowed his brow, about to point out that listening to ten different songs at once was hardly anyone's idea of entertainment, but a small, urgent wave from Lupin made him hold his tongue. He understood. Even for a Legilimagus, the female mind was still largely incomprehensible, and best left unprovoked.

Tonks continued skipping about from station to station with a scowl, until she dialed past an obviously urgent voice. Harry and Lupin both hunched forward with squawks of "Stop!" and "That was it!" to which Tonks responded with a surly "Shhh!" as she turned the dial back. "... reporting live from the Ministry of Magic. What's happening, Rita?"

"Scoggins, right now I'm in the Atrium, where a shocked crowd has gathered to watch the utterly unexpected return of none other than Sirius Black!"

Harry rolled his eyes as soon as he recognized the voice of Rita Skeeter. He groaned aloud and reached for the tuner, but Tonks swatted his hand away. "Oh, come on, ANY other station!" he pleaded in a hushed voice, but Tonks would have none of it, brandishing her wand meaningfully over the dial. He slouched back into his seat with a disgruntled huff as the report continued.

"Black seems to be the Wizarding World's luckiest man. Not only was he recently pardoned for the crimes that put him in Azkaban, but he was allegedly dead, and seems to have wriggled his way out of that as well! Eye witnesses throughout the Atrium report that Black strolled into the Ministry through the Visitor's Entrance, very much alive and leading a prisoner! Yes, Scoggins, if witnesses are to be believed, Black has somehow captured his cousin, the notorious Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange, and returned her to Ministry custody. Of course, this roving reporter has yet to see either of them, as they were immediately rushed to the Auror Offices on Level Two, but I'll be waiting right here to confirm these unbelievable stories, all night if that's what it takes!"

"Thank you, Rita," said the announcer Scoggins in a rushed tone of forced politeness. He was obviously familiar with Skeeter's tendency to blather on for the sheer pleasure of hearing herself talk. There was a tiny snippet of her voice starting up and being rapidly cut off before Scoggins spoke again. "There you have it, sorcerers: Sirius Black has been spotted in the Ministry Atrium, leading Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange to her arrest. Stay tuned for further developments on this stunning story--" The voice clamped off as Harry flicked his wand at the wireless and wordlessly turned it off.

"Hey!" screeched Tonks.

"What?" grunted Harry. "That's it. I can't believe *she* got to it first." He glared at Lupin. "Did you hear her? 'Pardoned?' He was found innocent, not pardoned! She made it sound like he still did something wrong, to deserve to be put in Azkaban!" He clenched his fists and stomped over to the window.

Tonks glared after him and flipped the wireless back on, but turned the volume down as she resumed searching for more reports. Lupin gave her a weary shrug then came

up behind Harry and began kneading the younger man's shoulders. "I know, Harry. But that's only one report, and it wasn't even on the WWN. They'll be much more... *objective*. And besides, Sirius can hold his own against the likes of *her* once he comes down for the interview, not to mention Arthur will--"

Lupin stopped so abruptly that Harry tried to whirl around to see what was the matter, but the hands on his shoulders held firm. "Don't move," Lupin hissed urgently. From across the room, Tonks suddenly gasped and leaped to her feet, abandoning the wireless.

"What?" said Harry, in a much squeakier voice than he would have liked. Twisting his head around to appraise the other wizard, he followed Lupin's gaze down to the middle of his robe. He gasped as well. Faint but definitely visible, a glowing green Dark Mark was forming in the air beside his right thigh.

Harry stared at it a moment, slackjawed, then instinctively tried to bat it away. His hand passed through it without altering it in the slightest. "Remus, what's going on?" he squeaked again, though he could tell by the look on Lupin's face that he was equally baffled.

"The hutch! Look!" said Tonks from behind them. Both wizards turned as one to the fireplace, where the small cabinet sat on the mantelpiece. Long, wispy tendrils of light or magic or some sort of green energy streamed lazily from the edge of the mantel in a gentle slope toward Harry, before spreading out and twisting back upon themselves to shape the Mark.

Harry realized that there was a similar strand coming from inside his robe. More affronted than afraid, he yanked the robe off. Holding it at arms' length, he could feel the weight of the mysterious red book, right in the pocket where the green glow was originating.

He looked sharply up at Lupin, then took a few steps toward the fireplace. The floating Mark followed along a bit clumsily, but re-formed even more brightly when it finally settled in the new position. Harry pulled his arm back in, and the robe stretched in the air for a few seconds before it obeyed the call of gravity. The Mark slid reluctantly back toward the robe, dimming slightly.

Harry very nearly asked Lupin, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" but with one glance into his eyes, there was no need. They both knew what was in the hutch, and they both guessed what was in the robe pocket.

"Get Alastor," Lupin said hoarsely to Tonks, who immediately sent off her Patronus. It launched through the floor toward the kitchen, and soon the *step-thump* of Mad-Eye Moody's hobbled gait sounded on the stairs. The old man threw open the door to the drawing room without hesitating, his scarred face twisting into what passed for a grin seconds later.

"How long'd you plan to keep the last Horcrux in yer pocket, Potter?" the old man smirked.

They took the locket and the gold cup out of the hutch and set them on the drawing room table with the red book. A bright Dark Mark formed over the center of the three objects, supported by a tripod of wispy green light. They all stared in fascination for a brief moment, then Moody picked up the cup and started across the room. "Best keep 'em separated," he grunted, setting it atop a wooden file cabinet in the corner. "Weren't meant to be together, an' they shouldn't be talking amongst themselves."

Lupin headed to a corner with the locket as soon as Moody's statement sunk in. Harry took up the red book and stood just inside the drawing room door. The magical tendrils flowing from the Horcruxes diffused across the distance between them, and the floating Mark finally faded and vanished.

"This is the last one," said Harry, his heart pounding. "He still thinks I'm the sixth. We have them all."

"Should'a seen it before," Moody muttered in self reproach. "Relic that old, comin' from Godric's Hollow... A' course it's an Horcrux--if that wasn't owned by Gryffindor, I'll eat my pointy hat!" He thunked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Goin' daft, I reckon," he added.

Harry stared at the book in his hand as though it had suddenly turned into a dead, rotten fish. "And I was just reading it!" he said, grimacing with the memory of Riddle's diary.

"Except Voldemort didn't write this one," said Lupin, hanging the locket high on the wall with a Sticking Charm. He came over and took the book from Harry, studying the cover reverently. "Even Gryffindor didn't write it, he just owned it for a while."

Lupin glanced at Moody, who cocked his head noncommittally. "Terrible shame to destroy it," the old Auror said. "Course, that book's imbued with some right ancient magic; who knows? Be nice if the power that kept it safe this long can see it through Riddle's tampering."

Harry returned the book to his bedroom, tucking it uneasily into the top drawer of his nightstand. It had been living in his trunk at the foot of the bed for the entire school year and shown no aggressive tendencies--not even, he realized, when he'd put the undiscovered locket into the trunk and shipped both Horcruxes to Headquarters for the Yule holidays. The cup and locket had resided in the hutch together for months and never revealed themselves as anything but ordinary magical objects, either.

*Must've taken three of them together to set off the reaction,* Harry pondered as he moved the book to the wardrobe by the door. It made sense, in a way. Voldemort wouldn't want his Horcruxes casually revealing themselves if they chanced to be brought together; once you found the first one, you could use it to locate the others. But if three or more came together, Voldemort would certainly want to know they were being collected...

Harry gulped and took the book up to the attic, then, after a quick word with Lupin, stashed the golden cup in Kreacher's old den under the pantry in the basement. He sat at the kitchen table and fidgeted with a cheap fork, magically contorting the tines, until the fireplace flared green and Ondossi popped out. She was carrying a huge parcel wrapped in brown paper, which looked like a very large owl cage. "What's up, pup?" she chirped.

"We've had some perfect timing," Harry began, eyeing her luggage curiously. "Turns out we have all the Horcruxes now--I've been carrying the last one since last summer."

Tura looked like she might drop the parcel. "You funnin' me?"

Harry scoffed. "If I felt like joking, I'd pick a topic that was actually amusing."

Nodding pensively, Tura slid into the chair across from Harry. "Well. So we really are meant to start this now. Or end this now, depending on how you look at it." Both of them stared intently at the warped fork, lost in thought.

"Voldemort still thinks I'm the sixth one, right?" Harry finally asked.

Tura shrugged. "I think. I never got a good clean shot at exactly what they were, that one time I got in his head. Only that there were six."

"Didn't Bellatrix Lestrange know?" Harry said, surprised that Tura was so uncertain.

Now it was Ondossi's turn to scoff. "She knew he had 'A Horcrux' that brought him back, and that was it. Come on, Harry, give the guy more credit than *that*, even he's not crazy enough to trust that nut job."

"So all that time you spent in her mind--you didn't learn anything useful?"

Her eyes turned cold and she stabbed the fork into the tabletop. "Amazingly, there are things having nothing to do with you and your big quest, that are still *useful*." She scraped the chair back from the table, snatched up her parcel, and stomped off.

Harry swallowed hard and pulled the fork out of the wood, wordlessly sealing the little punctures it left. A year ago, he would have bristled defensively at her words, but he knew now what they really meant. She was afraid. "I'm sorry, Tura," he whispered to the empty room.

He lurked a bit longer by the kitchen hearth in hopes that Sirius would come home, but it was uncomfortably quiet downstairs. He'd grown used to Headquarters being a bustling, noisy place, but a heavy silence had descended on the house. It was uncomfortably reminiscent of the "old days" of the Order, when Sirius and Remus were trapped here alone for weeks on end. Tura was the only one who came through the Floo all afternoon, and there was no sign of a would-be chef preparing to cook dinner. When the shadows on the lawn grew long and the sunlight had turned warm and golden, Harry began pulling ingredients out of the cupboards and set about fixing a meal.

Tonks came downstairs so quietly she nearly startled him into dropping a bowl full of batter. "Aren't you sweet?" she said. "Only it was my night to cook." She took a closer look at the countertop. "Uh, waffles?"

"Wasn't much else," Harry grunted, opening the top of a Muggle-style wafflemaker and levitating its crispy contents onto a stack in the warm oven. "Strawberries, butter, and flour. What exactly were you going to make?"

"There's great take-away curry two streets over, if you must know," she smirked. "But the little market's even closer; I can go get some bacon and a bit of cream, perhaps." Harry nodded, grinning, as he poured more batter on the waffle iron.

Sirius Floored home just as the handful of guests around the table were finishing their supper. "Was this once full of strawberries?" he growled cheerfully, examining the thin pink juice and tiny seeds at the bottom of the bowl. Harry had one remaining on his plate and immediately offered it to his godfather, but Sirius waved him away with a grin. "No worries," he said as he bit the corner off the last waffle. "I went to the Weasleys' first--Arthur had a little reception after work. He didn't want anyone trying to trace me through the Floo and end up here. Besides, I had to drink a toast to Percy Ignatius, the chap who cleared my good name." With that, Sirius raised the nearest drink (Lupin's mug of tea) and Percy's name echoed warmly amongst the clinking of cups and glasses.

When the table had settled down a bit, Sirius regaled them with tales of the "pageant" he'd put on for the Ministry and the *Daily Prophet*. "I think Fleur should go into show business after this," he confided with a bark of laughter. "It was like clockwork, you know. The security guard didn't know I was coming, apparently--they wanted to get a genuine reaction down in the Atrium. I just held my head high and announced I'd captured a renegade Death Eater, and would he call the Aurors? Poor fellow looked like he'd seen a Basilisk! I finally had to tap my ID badge to get him to focus--it was a classic, it said 'Sirius Black, Scion of Justice' or something like that. I think one of the reporters snagged it from my robe."

Kingsley Shacklebolt had been part of the act, as had Arthur Weasley and Alice Longbottom. Fleur had scripted their roles carefully, from Kingsley's outraged disbelief and angry demand that Sirius prove his identity, to Mr. Weasley's heartfelt debriefing of the Atrium crowd, an astounded Percy at his side. "Arthur told them I'd tampered with something in the Department of Mysteries which spat me out in another dimension," explained Sirius, to rounds of appreciative laughter. "That I'd been fighting for my life to get back to this world ever since, linked here only by my would-be murderer, my lovely cousin. So when I finally came back, I landed right on top of her and brought her in. Good story, what?"

"Brilliant!" agreed Harry and Remus at the same time. "Tonks came up with that last bit, you know," added Lupin, squeezing his future wife by the shoulders as she Metamorphed her face into a flat, blank pane. "It's true!" he insisted, picking up her chin and giving it a little shake until her normal visage popped back out, blushing shyly but grinning too. "Adora saw Sirius get hit at the battle and reckoned that was the perfect connection." He glowed with pride, which only made Tonks turn a brighter pink, until she nearly matched her hair.

The mood sombered after that, as Lupin explained that the last Horcrux had been found. "It's upstairs, Siri. Ondossi and Harry are getting ready to set out for Siberia. She wants your help with something later, not sure what. But it's all coming together at once; we need a plan for these Horcruxes."

Moody had sat in silence at the end of the table for the whole meal, but he cleared his throat gruffly. "We've shown our hand," he said. "Voldemort's got to respond to his lady friend being paraded into custody. Had it easy up till now, what with him trying to whip his army back into shape." He paused, giving them a stern look with his human eye. "You know that's why he's been targeting Hong Kong and Johannesburg of late. Giving them some practice before they go after the real thing."

"London," murmured Harry.

Moody scowled at him. "Hogwarts, boy! That's the dream, innit? He didn't even attack Hogwarts that day he stormed the Ministry. Savin' it for his best army--because he don't want it ruined, he wants it intact. 'Cept for the staff and students, of course."

"Then we'll make our stand at Hogwarts," said Sirius calmly. "You and Tura will need what, five days to reach the keep? Once you're in position, I'll take the Horcruxes up to Hogwarts and destroy them. Strike him and them at the same time--he'll have to divide his defenses."

Lupin stared long and hard at his best friend. "You mean to destroy them?" he asked incredulously.

Sirius shrugged. "I'm still part of the Sisterhood," he smirked. "If Molly will help, I'm game to try again. It went pretty well the first time," he added, tousling Harry's hair over his scar.

Lupin shook his head, a dazed expression on his face. "All this time I've reckoned I'd have to do it, or die trying... Siri, are you sure?"

Gray eyes sparkled with courage and charm. "Oh, yes, Reem, I'm *serious*." Everyone at the table rolled their eyes and groaned.

Terrible puns have a knack for ending an oppressive mood, and this one was no exception. People pushed back from the table in a relaxed manner, slowly scattering to their individual agendas for the evening. Harry followed his godfather up the stairs hoping they might spend some time together, but Tura waved at them from the old formal dining room on the ground floor. The parcel she'd brought from Hogwarts was unwrapped in the center of the big table, amidst many scrolls and maps. It was the golden perch from Dumbledore's office, the one Fawkes used to sit on.

Harry paused in the arched entryway and studied it a moment. "No," he finally said thoughtfully, "it just doesn't work there. Maybe in the corner?"

His (albeit weak) effort at humor earned him a Hairy Eyeball from Tura, but Sirius poked him playfully in the ribs.

"Yeah, yeah," she sneered. "Just get in here. We got something important to do."

"Is it *serious*?" said Sirius, making both wizards chortle like schoolboys as Tura scowled even harder.

"Great," she grumbled. "Comedians, now. Don't quit the day job." She spared them a single exasperated smile then set her jaw. "I just had a little chit chat with Albus Dumbledore's portrait," she continued grimly.

"And?" said Harry, all mischief forgotten.

She sighed. "And we have a job to do. Not a pleasant one."

Harry glanced back and forth between her, the perch, and his godfather. He didn't know what to say, but he was quite sure he didn't like this turn of events. Especially after Sirius stared long and hard at Tura and began to nod. They didn't seem to be using Legilimency either. "Siri..." he said urgently.

"You're walking straight into danger, Harry," said the wizard. "Fawkes won't take that very well; you know that. And his magic might as well be a homing beacon for the Dark Army."

Harry's stomach lurched as he glanced again at the perch. "Hold on, you two, just hold on." He had a notion of what they were up to, but couldn't even bear to put it in words.

"He *has* to stay here, Harry," said Tura gently. "We won't get ten feet inside the wards without being spotted."

Harry backed up until he ran into the wall. "No. He can't... I won't let you separate us." His forehead and palms broke out in a clammy sweat.

Sirius suddenly pulled him tightly against his chest. "Harry, she's right. You've got to get hold of yourself. This isn't your reaction, it's Fawkes's. Concentrate! Don't panic. You've got to use your head."

Strong arms clasped him, kept him from struggling, even as Tura's small hands smoothed his hair comfortingly. "He's really Bonded, isn't he?" Harry heard Sirius whisper over his head, as he fought to master the abject terror urging him to throw both of them off and run for his life.

"Just think, Harry," urged Tura gently, stroking his face and forehead. "You can do this. It needs to be done."

Closing his eyes and burying his face in his godfather's shoulder, Harry forced himself to slow his breathing and overcome the sense of dread that had suddenly overtaken him. "Okay. It's okay," he repeated under his breath. When his head was more or less clear, he squeezed Sirius's waist to let him know it was safe to let go. Sirius's grip slackened enough to let him lean back. Both were looking at him with such sympathy they seemed ready to cry.

"I'm all right," he said. "I mean, I was all right the whole time... That was the weirdest thing."

Sirius nodded, releasing him. "I imagine so. It'll be even worse when we actually secure the poor fellow, Harry. He's really not going to like this, but you understand, we have to make him do it."

"Why can't Fawkes just come with me?" he countered.

"Ah!" squawked Tura, pointing right in his face. "Stay in control, Harry! You know why. We're walking into a trap here, and he can't help but protect you. If he rebirths behind those wards... It'll be worse than the Cruciatius, watching him starve. The Dark Lord might even be able to kill him for good! Merlin only knows what nasty Dark magic he's come up with by now--especially with that feather from Fawkes in his wand."

Harry had to breathe rapidly through his nose again to calm himself down, but he knew they were right. It was never even in question, really, but his emotional response was clearly coming straight from his beloved familiar. Fawkes, for all his vast knowledge, was still a creature, an animal, driven by instinct rather than rationality. He didn't care that Harry had to face this danger, or that he walked into it of his own will. He knew only that he *must* protect his Bonded wizard; it wasn't just his duty, it was the core of him, his bread-and-butter, the reason he lived.

Harry groaned and collapsed against his godfather again. "I can't do it," he said. "You're going to have to. I don't even know how, but if I did, I couldn't." He looked up long enough to seek out that troll-leg umbrella stand in the hall, certain he was going to throw up any minute.

"It's okay," Ondossi said soothingly. "That's why I talked to Albus. I know the spell we need. You don't have to do it, Harry. In fact, I think Black should do it. Once he's bound, only the binder can release him... well, that and your death," she added reluctantly.

"That's what happened the night Dumbledore was killed, you know," she continued. "Albus bound Fawkes to the perch himself, so Feathers wouldn't stop him from getting the Horcrux. Fawkes would never have let him drink that potion in the cave--he'd have destroyed it, or taken Albus right outta there. And then Lord Voldemort would know Albus had caught onto his secrets, and the whole game would be up."

Harry had wondered now and then, in the back of his mind, how Snape had even managed to murder Dumbledore that night, for Fawkes should have prevented it. But it all made sense now. Dumbledore had bound the phoenix to his perch to keep him from interfering--but this also kept him from rushing to Dumbledore's aid after they'd returned safely from the cave. Poor Fawkes had been forced to sit still as Dumbledore was murdered a few storeys above his head. Only afterward could he break free of the binding spell to sing his mournful song.

Harry wrenched away from Sirius with the warning, "Gonna be sick," and made it just in time to the umbrella stand. *I'm so glad Reem didn't get rid of this thing*, he noted once he could think straight again. The troll leg annoyed Tonks so much that Lupin had kept it just to be ornery, but it had certainly earned its keep.

In the end, Harry had set Fawkes on the golden perch with shaking hands, then fled to the attic to avoid the binding ritual. He would have bolted right out the front door, but the waves of anguish and rage from Fawkes were enough to double him over, and he didn't want to collapse out on a Muggle sidewalk. Fawkes let out one enormous screech that rang through the house, but then all went quiet. A few minutes later, he heard familiar footsteps on the attic stairs.

"We're done," said Sirius. "You all right?"

Harry shuddered. "Little shaky. How, ah, how's he taking it?"

Sirius sat on the top step and leaned back against the door jamb. "He was pretty mad at first," he admitted. "But he's not struggling anymore, at least. I was worried he'd fight too hard, maybe even hurt himself. But the spell calmed him down. Looks a bit dazed at the mo, almost like he's been hypnotized."

"You knew we'd have to lock him up," Harry noted dully.

Sirius ducked his head guiltily. "I sat the N.E.W.T. in Magical Creatures, you know. I knew he couldn't go with you, not past those wards. I thought we'd have to wait until he burned up--maybe even make him." He winced at the murderous look that suddenly crossed Harry's face. "Yeah, well, none of us wanted that, either. I'm glad Ondossi thought to get the spell from Dumbledore's portrait."

Harry nodded, embarrassed by his runaway emotions. "Me too. I really couldn't have... forced him to burn. We'd have had to wait until he was ready."

Sirius nodded, and both of them sighed heavily. It had been a long and eventful day. There were no windows in the attic, and it was now rather dark, lit only by stray beams of lamplight from the main stairwell. Neither of them made any show of lighting a candle, or even their wands.

"Promise me something, Sirius," Harry said quietly, after a long silence.

"Anything."

"If I don't make it, you'll take care of Tura."

Sirius blinked several times. For a moment it seemed he might avoid the subject by blustering about the need to think positive, but his godfather didn't play such games. "Ah, Harry, I think she can provide for herself," he finally mumbled.

"I don't mean food and shelter. I mean... I don't know what I mean. If Voldemort survives, she'll have to run, Siri. She may never be able to stop."

"Hmm. And running is certainly one of my specialities," his godfather noted ruefully.

"Don't knock it! You're good at staying one step ahead! She's always been part of her people, her nation. She... doesn't do very well by herself. I just... I want to know that if I fall, she won't have to run alone."

"She won't want to run," Sirius said plainly. "She'll want to fight, especially if... she loses you."

Harry shook his head violently. "She can't fight! I'm the only one with any chance of beating him! Besides, he's her father. Killing him would plunge her into Darkness--it



would be repeating Tom Riddle's own history! She skirts the line enough as it is, just having his genes. She'll have to run," he repeated gently. "Everyone will. Promise me you'll run with her."

A lump fought its way down Sirius's throat. "I don't know she'd let me, Harry, to be honest."

Harry closed his eyes momentarily to strengthen his patience. "She will if you make it a promise to me. She's keen on keeping promises."

Sirius stretched out his hand into the darkness and Harry took it in a firm grip. Sirius held on for a moment, then tugged him closer and kissed him on the forehead. "You have my word," he said softly.

## 42: The Crossing

*Chapter 42 of 50*

Harry and Ondossi embark at last on the quest that has dominated Harry's life. It takes a strange twist...

"No way! I am NOT getting on one of those...*things* without my wand!"

It was a challenging morning. No one had slept particularly well the night before. Together, Harry and Sirius drank an entire case of butterbeer before finding a cache of Firewhisky, and started singing ribald songs in the drawing room at two AM. That went on until Ondossi lit into them, screaming like a banshee in English, Inupiaq, and Parseltongue. That killed the jocular mood, but not the noise; the two wizards ended up sitting in the staircase, tearfully assuring each other of their undying love and admiration. Lupin finally put a Silencing spell on both of them and locked them in their bedrooms. The breakfast table was loaded with bleary eyes and frowns, but light on food, the waffle ingredients having been consumed for dinner the night before.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You have to, Harry. They're very fussy about what you can bring on board."

"Might poke somebody's eye out," smirked Ondossi.

Hermione and Ron were lauded as heroes when they Flooed into the kitchen. They were a veritable walking buffet, bearing platters of sticky buns, muffins, sausages, even a huge cheese omelette. "Dobby's idea," Ron said. "He knows nobody here cooks a decent breakfast. And I can't let my best mate head off with an empty stomach." He glanced quizzically around the ring of faces. "Where *is* Harry?"

Tonks, practically drooling on a tray of hot sliced ham that eluded capture by floating persistently above her hand, waved at him impatiently. "He and Snuffles won't be up for a while yet. Might you *Finite* these, already?"

Sirius soon sniffed his way down to the kitchen with an absurd bed-head and bloodshot eyes, but he grinned and ate his share of breakfast (albeit slowly). Harry, however, slept in until the food had long gone cold and only the bran muffins were left.

"Are you crazy? What if something breaks? Or it runs out of gas? I don't even see how they get off the ground in the first place!" Harry's knuckles were white around the handle of his wand, as Hermione and Tura scowled at him over the open lid of a Muggle suitcase.

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Hermione in exasperation. "Muggles use them all over the world, every day! They're perfectly safe. Furthermore, if you try to carry that with you, they might try to confiscate it!"

"Face it, Harry, it has to go in the luggage department," said Ondossi irritably.

"Compartment," said Hermione.

She had bought the airplane tickets, ordering them with her little cell phone. No one else was quite sure how to do that, least of all Harry, who had been left home with a sitter whenever the Dursleys traveled. He'd complained bitterly about traveling Muggle-style, but Ondossi insisted. Voldemort would be watching the borders of his fortress carefully, now that the news of Bellatrix Lestrange's capture had been spread far and wide. There was little point in sneaking through his wards if he was watching for London traffic via Floo or Portkey. "And even the stupid Ministry can tell if we Apparate--remember that ticket I got?"

Harry was forced to capitulate, as usual, but this business about stowing his wand was just too much. He gave it his best shot, but in the end, he grudgingly stuffed it in his suitcase. He did make Hermione put several different jinxes on all the luggage against theft, loss, crushing, falling out of any unexpected holes, and even rough jostling.

The group Flooed to "Terminal Zero" at Heathrow Airport, which was essentially an empty broom closet behind the main British Airways ticketing area. Wizards rarely used airlines, but there were tourist agencies that sold "Muggle Excursion Get-Away" packages, complete with non-magical travel. The ill-lit room had a huge checklist posted on the door, as well as a bored-looking portrait reminding sorcerers that they were now entering the Muggle world and would they please check over their clothing and appearance for any magical oddments?

As Lupin reached for the doorknob, however, the uniformed lady in the portrait gave him a flat smile and shook her head. "Ticketholders only are allowed in the gate area," she said. "Passengers with tickets, please file through the door one at a time."

Remus turned around and gaped at the others. "How do you like that?" he said.

Tonks palmed her forehead. "Snap! I forgot about the heightened security. There was a bit of trouble last summer when, erm, some hooligans came through 'T0' and tried to steal one of the airport X-ray machines. They thought it was a 'Hex-Ray,' see? Felt entitled to it. Everyone had to pull a shift with Magical Catastrophes, all those Muggles watching Fred and Geo--" Her hand flew over her mouth in a panic.

"That's why I had to post bail for them?" demanded Ron loudly. "They're dead. They're SO dead. They haven't even paid me back!"

Sirius, meanwhile, frowned and said, "You mean they're NOT 'Hex-Ray' machines?"

The portrait steadfastly refused to let anyone through without a ticket. Hermione happened to have some Travelcards in her purse, good for use on the Underground. She and Viktor had used them during the spring holidays and they were still valid for transportation. She engaged in a lengthy argument with the portrait about the definition of "ticketholders" while Remus and Tonks said a rather abrupt goodbye and dodged into the Floo before Tonks started crying.

Ron and Sirius eyed each other awkwardly. Even if Hermione managed to convince the portrait to let them through with the subway cards, she only had two of them. Someone else had to go back through the Floo. Ondossi glanced between them a few times, then quietly slunk out into the Muggle terminal. The portrait interrupted its discussion with Hermione just long enough to flash an insincere smile and say, "Enjoy your adventure."

Ron finally shrugged. "Never was keen on long goodbyes." As he turned and regarded Harry, a procession of emotions played across his face. He opened his mouth a few times, obviously struggling for words, then shrugged again. "Not too late to let me come along," he finally said, his voice gravelly.

They fell into a mutual bear hug, each one misty-eyed. "Ron," Harry whispered, his throat suddenly too tight to give volume to his speech.

"I know. Just... be sure you make it. Okay?"

"I will," he said, thumping Ron's back. "I will."

Ron stepped back and forced himself to smile at his best friend one last time, then spun on his heel and leaped into the Floo. The silly git didn't even say goodbye, but that was just Ron. He had to get away or he'd break down in tears, and neither of them wanted the other to fall apart. Harry waited until the flames had died back down to a yellow flicker before he said it himself, softly, under his breath: "Bye, Ron."

In the end, Hermione's boilerplated reasoning prevailed over the painting, and the four of them found their way through the dazzling bustle of the Muggle airport. The terminal was much more modern and bright than King's Cross Station, which was essentially the only other Muggle building Harry had entered in years. He felt eerily conspicuous among the bright tiles and fluorescent lights, after the dark stone walls and lanterns of Hogwarts.

The sense of exposure and vulnerability did nothing to improve Harry's mood about surrendering his wand in his checked baggage. At the gate, he sat near the entry ramp, skimming the thoughts of every person as they got on board, making sure none of them were planning a hijacking. Tura and Hermione rolled their eyes and giggled at him, but Sirius merely shook his head. Harry scowled at each of them in turn, between passengers; what difference did a bit of Legilimency matter among Muggles? None of them were aware he was doing it--and if there chanced to be a wizard or Squib among them, well, aside from getting startled, they'd probably be glad to know someone was checking in on security. X-ray or Hex-Ray, Harry didn't trust that thing to screen out screwballs with any reliability.

As the line boarding the plane dwindled, Tura said her goodbyes and tromped down the jetway. When the gate attendant announced the final boarding call, Harry started to grumble a gruff farewell to Hermione, but was cut short when he saw her eyes had suddenly filled with tears.

"Harry..." she said, then scooped him into a hug so tight, she nearly lifted him off the ground. It struck him, very hard, that he might never see either of them again.

"None of that, Harry," said Sirius firmly. He was referring to the dimming of his hope, not the prolonged embrace with his friend. "Come now, both of you..."

"I believe in you, Harry," Hermione whispered in his ear, then stepped back smartly, her jaw set with a courage that belied the mistiness in her eyes. She opened her mouth as if to say something else, but he put up his hand. *I love you, too*, he said wordlessly, placing the thought straight into her heart.

Sirius simply opened his arms for a hug, then stepped back with a warm smile. "Off, now! And we'll see you when you get back!"

Harry did all right on his first plane flight, except during the takeoff. And landing. And there was quite a bit of turbulence in between that caused him considerable distress. But when he finally clambered down the stairs at the airport in Moscow, pale and weak-kneed, Tura patted his hand and congratulated him for keeping the contents of his stomach confined within the little bags every single time.

The second leg of the trip was worse. When they finally landed in Krasnoyarsk, he slumped onto a granite bench outside the terminal, thinking he'd rather walk the rest of the way, even if it was hundreds of miles. To make matters worse, Ondossi eventually bounded out of the small building like a ping-pong ball with something to prove.

"This is so cool! It's SO cool! I found a bush pilot who'll fly us right where we need to go... and the town he's landing in is called *Tura*!" she bellowed in his ear. "Come on, let's hurry and find the Yakushchenkos, we've GOT to buy a camera. If they have a 'First Church of Tura' I will DIE, though it'll be written in Cyrillic, I suppose..." Harry didn't even have the energy to shake his head in disbelief; he just pressed himself harder against the stone, soaking up the relieving sensation of being planted firmly on solid ground.

He barely registered their hosts at first. They spoke no English, but as soon as they saw Harry's forehead they began discussing his scar, and he was too dehydrated and miserable to put forth any effort to meet them. Tura apparently explained that he'd not taken well to flying, because the *babushka* of the family (a great, rosy witch with her hair pulled under an intricately dyed shawl that would have made Professor Trelawny seethe with envy), looked him up and down with a calculating eye and declared (in her own language, but with unmistakable intent) that he would be getting some rest and fattening up while in her charge. Later that evening, wolfing down tea, boiled potatoes, and a soup made of pickles, Harry reflected that matrons like this, Mrs. Weasley's local counterpart, were the force that kept the world turning.

He and Tura left early the next morning, their packs bulging with sausages and pickles. Harry was greatly relieved that he need not part with his wand on the last flight in their journey, but he longed to be back on a jet when he saw the aircraft they would be taking. "You can't be serious. LOOK at that thing! It's smaller than a car!"

The Muggle pilot folded his arms and glared between Harry and Ondossi. She raised her hand in the universal gesture of "Hang on a minute while I straighten this out," and rounded on Harry. "For the love of Merlin, Harry, be polite!" she hissed. "He's doing us a big favor--he doesn't normally fly up to Tunguska for two more weeks!"

"But LOOK at it!" Harry pleaded. "Can we even fit?" He was afraid to ask what was really on his mind, namely whether this pilot kept a supply of those sturdy paper bags like the big jets had. "How do you know it's safe?"

She put her hands on her hips and glowered for a moment. "Oh, for Pete's sake. Private pilots fly little puddlejumper like this all over the world. We constantly bring them down over Northpole and adjust their memories. Big jets only go between big cities--these small planes go to the *interesting* places. They're the broomsticks of the Muggle world. Now shut up and get in there."

She was right. Though a bit more bumpy and clumsy, it was almost like riding a broom. The small plane didn't go nearly as high as the jet, and Harry found the view magnificent. He even noted a bit of payback, two hours into the trip. During a particularly sharp set of thermals, he realized that what he'd taken for an oddly-placed spring in his seat was, in fact, Tura's hands. From her seat in the rear of the plane, she had been gripping his backrest with white knuckles the entire time.

They started walking as soon as they arrived. Much to Ondossi's disappointment, the town was too small to bother with signs; anyone who traveled to that remote part of the world knew exactly where they were going beforehand. She traded her new camera to a baker for some hot *piroshki*, little rolls with meat baked inside, then she simply started walking toward the trees at the edge of town.

"Wait," Harry called, pointing to a "road" comprised of two dirt ruts with a strip of overgrown grass down the middle, "can't we at least use the path?"

She turned and walked backwards with a twinkle in her eye. "Mr. Potter, what makes you think there are ANY paths that lead where *we're* going?"

They covered a surprising amount of ground that afternoon. Harry was glad to have a chance to walk freely after being crammed into stuffy airplanes for two days. Tura had never been to Siberia, but she was excited to be back in the boreal forest and showed him dozens of plants and trees as they walked.

"This one's worth stopping for, Harry," she said, crouching before a shrubby plant with a wonderful, familiar aroma. "Kingsfoil. Practically extinct--you can only find it in the wildest lands. Break off a few leaves, they have remarkable healing properties. If only it was the right time for seeds..." She scrutinized the plant hopefully anyhow, then sniffed it once more before moving on.

The sunlight was just taking on a golden tint when Tura stopped at a stand of trees. "Let's camp here tonight." Nodding, Harry loosened his pack and let it fall. They put up their hammocks without speaking, not so much out of exhaustion, but because the buzz and whirl of insects and innumerable songs of birds needed no accompaniment of human voices.

She showed Harry how to start a fire with a rock and a black iron striker. Once it built up a bit, she tossed several flowering plants and a handful of pebbles on it. "Repels bugs," she said simply. "I know I said no magic, but if we don't do something, they'll carry us off in the night. The locals burn these plants too; if anyone's watching, we'll look like a couple of hunters that hit the lucky combination." She sunk into her hammock and flipped the blanket over her head.

Harry was tired, too, but he watched the long sunset crawl into twilight, then darkness. He had never seen so many stars beyond the treetops; he was glad he didn't have to take an Astronomy N.E.W.T. in this part of the world. It was cold, but he finally drifted off to sleep, curled up in his blanket and breathing in the clean scent of pine needles under an infinite sky.

So it went for next day, and the next. Ondossi told him that a comet had struck the Earth about a hundred miles to the south, scorching the earth and knocking down every tree for miles. "I'd imagine the Dark Lord plans to build his real fortress right in the center. He'd love to look out every morning and see the destruction. Most of it's hidden by new growth, but that could be removed. Imagine, Harry, his followers--or prisoners--suddenly spotting a castle in the distance; around it, nothing but row after row of black, broken trees, all pointing outward, as though they fell over themselves trying to get away from him. Sets the perfect tone, don't you think? I'm sure this little keep is just to tide him over until he can build the real thing."

Even though his wand sat unused in his pocket, Harry found he hardly missed it. Despite the long hours walking, he loved being outdoors in this open, quiet country. On the third afternoon, they felt the distinctive prickle of hostile magic; they had passed through the wards preventing Apparition into Voldemort's territory.

Tura netted fish whenever they passed a stream, and showed Harry how to identify and yank up *masu* or "Eskimo potatoes" to make stew. Harry attempted to pick some celery-flavored "poochki" on the third afternoon, but he hadn't noticed the way Tura had cautiously harvested the stalks. An hour later, his hands were covered with blisters. It was quite some time before she could scrounge up the ingredients for an antidote. Harry tried not to complain as he waited, but he couldn't help squirming uncomfortably. By the time she finally slapped the last of the leafy paste on his skin, he had acquired a humble appreciation for the tamer places of the world.

Near the end of the fourth day, Harry was admiring an enormous tree that had toppled headfirst down the hillside when he noticed a dark hole amidst the wild grasses at the base of the trunk. "Tura--look there."

She followed his gaze. "Ooh, a cave! Let's see if it's any good!"

Harry caught hold of her arm. "You're just going right in? What if something's in there?"

"Oh, I'm not too worried. There won't be any big predators here--they can sense *his* presence. That would give any bear the willies. Besides, do you see any tracks, or tufts of fur?" She rummaged on the ground for a dry bough and wrapped one end in a strip of waxy cloth from her pack. "Torch," she said, lighting the tip. "No telling how far back that goes, we should bring some light."

The cave was dry, though it smelled musty, and bits of punky wood littered the floor. There was a steep slope right behind the entry hole, but other than that, the floor was mostly level. The earthy inner wall was criss-crossed with roots; the outer wall was a tangle of dead wood, the base of the great tree. Harry spread his arms and bowed in a self-congratulatory fashion to Tura, who improvised a torch bracket in the hillside wall and said with a wry grin, "Good find, nature boy."

After giving the cave a close inspection, though, she beamed at him brightly. "This is perfect! We can even risk a little magic in here--we're totally underground."

"What?" Harry squawked. "We've come all this way without magic and now that we're on his doorstep, you take out your wand?"

She held up her palms to indicate the cave, as though the answer was obvious. "Harry! This is Inupiat land, all the way from here to Alaska. It *knows* me. It'll keep our secrets while we're under it. Make yourself scarce, I'm going to conjure up a bath *right now*."

She already had her wand out and was beginning to wave it, but he caught her wrist. "No! Don't you think this is a little too coincidental--finding a perfect hiding place right here? What if this is some sort of guard outpost or something? We should get out of here *now*!"

She sighed impatiently. "Look, cast your mind around a little, Harry. Keep it in the ground, but open yourself. Can you feel the presence of any other human being within five miles of here?"

He frowned, but it did seem like a reasonable idea. Concentrating, he envisioned a very low fog stretching from the mouth of the cave. As he let his mind expand into it, he felt the presence of hundreds of tiny animals on their constant, wide-eyed quest for food, but no people at all, nothing larger than a rabbit. "No," he admitted, "not now, anyway, but don't you see, he could have set all this up to lure people in, it could even be a trap!" He scanned the walls as though they might collapse on them at any moment. "I think we--"

She clamped her hand over his mouth. "I told you, this is *my* land. You understand--it knows my blood, my people. And it knows him, too. I... introduced them, so to speak, a while back. It takes a lot to get the Land's attention, believe me, but it knows who he is and it sides with us. Trust me on this, Harry. We're safe here."

She looked so certain, and Harry wanted to believe. It would be so nice to sleep in comfort, without having to worry about biting flies or flipping out of the hammock in the night. *I suppose if we get captured, we'll just get it over with that much quicker* he thought. "All right," he muttered grudgingly. "Only... save some hot water for me?"

She glanced up from the barrel she was conjuring. "Yeah, yeah. Now scam, and don't come back for at least half an hour."

Harry rolled his eyes and half climbed, half vaulted through the mouth of the cave. He walked beside the decaying tree until he came to a branch that was still attached; it must have been thirty feet off the ground when the tree was alive. Though spongy, it still had enough strength to support his weight, and he used it to hoist himself onto the trunk. He walked nearly the length of the tree, noting the fungus and lichens spreading their infectious color over what was left of the rugated bark, turning the tree back into soil. Parts of the trunk were already becoming indistinguishable from the hillside, as ferns and moss sprouted from the last blackened bits of wood.

He turned around and walked back to the base of the trunk, then sat crosslegged and leaned back against the huge, bare roots poking up through the dirt. It was easy to imagine he was the last person on earth. It was so quiet here, so unspoiled. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, noting with bemusement the patches of prickly stubble here and there. A bit thin yet, but still, he noted with a certain pride, he needed a shave. He wondered if he would live long enough to grow a proper beard. Quite soon he was reflecting that this might be the last sunset he would ever watch, the last time he would sleep.

Harry tipped his head back against the silvery, weathered wood in resignation and breathed the cool, clean air.

She called his name softly. "Up here," he said, though he knew she couldn't possibly see him, even with her head poking out of the cave.

"Well, get down here and help me out! I just had a bath, darned if I'm going to scramble through dirt already."

One look at her and Harry burst out laughing. She had transfigured her robes into that coffee sack nightdress she loved so much, and he'd forgotten how absurdly frumpy it was. "What?" she said crossly.

"Nothing, nothing," he said. "Only you need some bunny slippers to finish off this look of yours." He gave her outstretched arms a mighty yank and she popped out of the cave. Both to his chagrin and amusement, she was wearing fuzzy purple walruses on her feet.

She was very moody and quiet over dinner. "We're right on schedule," she mumbled. "They're supposed to destroy the Horcruxes tomorrow." It wasn't necessary to remind him--Harry well knew they were nearing the end of their journey, and the thought of arriving at Voldemort's keep dampened his enthusiasm for conversation too. He peered around nervously when he went out to fill their canteens, wondering once again if Voldemort would have guards on patrol. He saw nothing, but his stomach was tightening by the minute.

He slid back into the cave and said, "Tura, I'm going to keep watch a while. How about I wake you up around two or so?"

She gave him an affronted glare and said, "I told you, we're safe here."

"I heard you. I just think it's a good idea."

"Rest is a good idea, too."

Harry wasn't in the mood to argue, and why was she acting so offended in the first place? "Look, we're practically on his doorstep. It would be totally stupid to just tuck in for the night. What's the matter with you?"

"What's the...heh. Nothing. Nothing matters, Harry!" she said sharply.

He frowned. "What?"

She stood up suddenly and Harry realized that her wand was in her hand. He was still holding the canteens, and dropped them immediately, but he had no time for any further reaction. She pointed her wand straight at him and said, "*Expelliarmus*." His wand burst from its pocket, ripping right through the fabric of his robe.

For a moment, all he could do was stare blankly at her. He even reached over to pick up his wand, unable to accept that she had really just disarmed him. "Don't move!" she snapped, pointing her wand at him again.

Harry straightened up to face her. "What's the matter with you? Is this some sort of joke? Because it's not--" His words transformed into a scream. As he spoke, Ondossi had interrupted with a single word.

"Crucio."

## 43A: The Battle of Many Armies, part I

### *Chapter 43 of 50*

As Harry and Ondossi wend their way through the wilderness, the Order takes on a mission of its own devising.

Because this chapter is over 9000 words thus far, I'm posting it in 2 parts. Hopefully I won't need to switcheroo anything once I get the next part written.

It had been many years since Sirius Black lived up to his reputation as a ladies' man. The stint in Azkaban and his subsequent fugitive status had wiped out any prospects for romance, and then his pseudo-death and temporary loss of magic hadn't improved matters. Only for the past few months, and within the walls of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, had he finally been restored amongst his peers in the Wizarding world--and the Witching world as well.

He felt rather awkward, therefore, as Hermione Granger stood beside him, silently weeping as they watched the Muggle jet pull away from the terminal. She was quite a bit younger than him, and judging by the diamond on her finger, the rumors about her and Viktor Krum must be true. He finally settled on draping a tentative arm over her shoulders. A godfatherly gesture, one he'd bestow upon Harry without giving it a second thought.

She immediately gripped his middle like a python and sobbed into his shoulder until the corner of his Muggle T-shirt was soggy with tears and Merlin-only-knew what else. Sirius wrinkled his nose, but patted her back comfortingly. Hermione was no frail flower; these were tears of sincere and profound grief.

"It'll be all right, luv. It'll be all right."

Hermione finally composed herself enough to step back and wipe her face impatiently. "Sirius," she said bleakly, "don't... Thank you, for being kind just now, but don't be patronizing. He won't be all right. We both know that." Her lip began to quiver.

"Funny, I heard you dropped Divination," he smirked. He clapped her twice on the shoulders. "Come on, what good's talk like that? Voldemort has no idea of the sorcerer Harry's become. Ondossi's no slouch, and she's there with him. And we're not sitting on our bums either."

That got Hermione's attention. She took a few deep breaths. "We're not?"

"Pah! Course not! You think I'd let my godson go off to fight, just like that?" He flicked his brows mischievously. "I've kept mum, because he's too polite to read me the way he does, and I didn't want him picking it up from anyone else."

Hermione's eyes gleamed. "Tell me the plan."

*My kind of girl*, Sirius thought before he could banish the notion. He winked and put a finger to his lips for a few more minutes' worth of quiet patience, then offered his arm and escorted her back to Headquarters.

Or tried to, anyway. The portrait in Terminal Zero refused to let them back in to use the Floo. They had, after all, claimed to be "ticketed passengers" when they went out that door. Hermione and Sirius were forced to take the Tube, which at first annoyed them greatly. The brand new Heathrow Express service had opened days before, and it did not accept Travelcards. Hermione tried to argue their way past the ticket counter, but the Muggle behind it was much more stubborn than the portrait. In the end, Sirius performed a few illegal (but discreet) Charms to get them onto the train, Hermione grumbling behind him all the way.

Sirius was surprised by the speed of the non-magical train, and when they got off at the Paddington Rail station to transfer, he capered around like a puppy off leash. He successfully begged for a sightseeing spree at Baker Street station, but Hermione drew the line after that. "Behave, now! I gave you the Sherlock Holmes tour, but there's nothing like that at Euston Square. We've already wasted half an hour!" She had to practically drag him away from King's Cross, as he'd only ever been to the railway platform and was curious about the tunnels and escalators beneath it. "Morgan le Fay, Sirius, I'll let you keep the Travelcard and play all you want, *after* I hear this plan of

yours!"

"Language!" he hissed impishly, but took her arm again and abandoned the sights and smells of the Underground.

They found Lupin wearing a hole in the rug before the kitchen fireplace. "Where've you been?" he snapped when they descended the stairs. "I was five minutes away from buying an airplane ticket just to get through Tee-Zed."

"Reem," Sirius chided, muttering, "Mother hen!" under his breath for Hermione's benefit. "Bloody portrait told us to go use our tickets--and the last thing I need right now is a citation for Apparating out of Muggle London."

Lupin scowled, but he finally rolled his eyes and waved both of them to the long table. "All right, out with it then," he grunted, leaning across the table expectantly.

Sirius blinked and gave his friend a puzzled smile. "What? You think I'm up to something?"

Lupin gave him the old Hairy Eyeball and drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Must I even answer that?" he grunted.

Sirius finally flopped onto his bed that night, bone-tired from his late night drinking with Harry, but too worked up to sleep. He and the rest of the "London Order" had spent the day sending Owls and barking instructions into Floos. The messages would propagate as he slept--for what might be the last time in his old bed. He would leave for Hogsmeade in the morning.

After wriggling restlessly on the big four-poster, he sat up and lit the oil lamp on his nightstand. He scanned the top shelf of his wardrobe. There, in the back--in a little box, naturally. Heaven forbid that Reem leave *one* messy, jumbled pile of stuff in the house, not even inside a shuttered wardrobe. *Might've been Tonksy*, he reckoned idly as he pulled down the box, then rejected the notion. Moony was the neat freak. They'd all joked, that summer after fourth year, that Remus was "born to Prefect."

"Look at us," he said aloud, softly, as he pulled the first photo out of the box. He looked so *thin* at seventeen, all legs and arms compared to now. *And I thought I looked so sharp at the time*, he mused with a wistful smile. *No idea I was such a gangly thing*. Of course, James was no better, smirking in the photo beside him, his hair pointing every direction but down. He tried to imagine how James might look now, but couldn't picture anything but the grinning youth.

He flipped slowly through the stack of photos. Once in a while Pettigrew would show up in one of them. James had owned the camera, but Peter usually took the pictures. When he came to a snapshot of just Prongs and Wormtail together, he nearly crumpled it in his fist. "Will I see you soon, Peter? Or will you turn tail and run out on your master, just like you did to us?" Getting up, he shoved the box back onto its shelf and stared out of the window, pressing his forehead to the cool glass.

*Should've been me that night*, he thought for the millionth time. *They kept him locked in a cupboard!* "Harry," he said aloud. They were in Krasnoyarsk by now, probably tucked in and fed in some cozy cottage. Again his stomach heaved and twisted; again he wished he'd gone along.

He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and renewed the vow he'd made when Harry insisted on heading to Siberia alone. He knew he couldn't stop his godson from meeting his fate with Voldemort, but he could clear a path. In a few days' time, every one of Voldemort's little minions would be storming the gates of Hogwarts, clamoring for the head of Sirius Black. He would finish that which his little brother had started: he would make Voldemort mortal again.

"What ARE you wearing?"

Sirius rounded the breakfast table and kissed his cousin noisily on the side of her head. "What's it look like?"

After crossing her eyes in mock concentration, she finally concluded, "Like some poor cow died in vain."

He sneered at her, which she instantly imitated perfectly, right down to the stubble on his chin. "You wish you looked so good in leather." Tonks laughed outright, her own features popping merrily back onto her face.

"I'm taking the bike up to Hogwarts," he said, reaching for a scone. "No time like the present, innit?" he responded to her inquisitive look. "Might not live to ride it again, all that."

Nodding, she pursed her lips in a sad smile. "Hardly any rush to get up there yet. Where are they, you think?"

Sirius peered at the clock. "It's what, four o'clock there? They should have flown up north by now. If they found a pilot." He set the scone back down, unable to take a bite after all.

His motorcycle was parked in the courtyard. He spent a few minutes lovingly waving James's wand over the chrome and leather, Vanishing any remaining dust from Umbridge's garden shed along with the morning dew. Lupin burst from the house in his nightshirt, his feet bare. "Thought I'd missed you," he said.

Sirius tried to think of a snappy comeback, but couldn't. He set the wand on the seat and strode toward his oldest friend. They met halfway, each with his arms wide. Sirius berated himself for shedding a tear, and was relieved to see, when they finally stepped back, that Lupin's eyes were misty as well.

"I could still come up for a couple of days, you know," Lupin said.

"Shut it, Reem," said Sirius. "Someone's got to coordinate things here. And the last thing we need is for you to get trapped up there." The full moon would rise in four more nights, and with Ondossi gone, there would be no Wolfsbane. Death Eaters had already broken the Floo Network once, and if they managed to disable Portkeys, Remus would be stuck on the Hogwarts grounds. The wolf couldn't distinguish between friend and foe when it attacked. Remus would have to weather this full moon alone in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and nurse himself back to health after the destructive night.

Lycanthropy had cost Remus Lupin many things over the course of his life, but nothing compared to the anguish of that moment, knowing he must abandon his friends at their most urgent hour. But he could hardly fight beside them when, with one flash of moonlight, he'd become a liability. Forcing back tears, he clasped Sirius to his chest again and promised, "I'll be up there as soon as I can."

"Not till you get your strength back, either, you wanker," grunted Sirius, but his throat tightened painfully. "I mean it," he said quietly. "No stupid heroics, right?"

"Hark who's talking," Lupin said. "I bow to the king of stupid heroics." They eyed each other as only the oldest friends can.

"Will you two knock it off?" hollered Tonks from an upstairs window. "I can't stand to start crying again."

"Then draw the curtains!" barked Sirius.

He stuffed Godric Gryffindor's red book in a deep pocket of the leather jacket. Once the book was secure at Hogwarts, Arthur would come for the gold cup and Apparate it to Hogsmeade, accompanied by Mad-Eye, Shacklebolt, and a host of other soldiers. They would advise the villagers either to flee or join them at the castle to fight, then make their way to Hogwarts. Sirius reckoned that most would opt to run and hide, but he hoped Rosmerta would at least send over a few kegs of butterbeer.

The locket would stay at Headquarters until they were ready to seal the borders of Hogwarts. That had been a point of contention, but Sirius held firm. "I want absolutely no risk of these things communicating until we're ready. Voldemort's always wanted Hogwarts. If there's any place he's likely to be watching, it's there."

He started the bike and revved the engine, which echoed mercilessly through the enclosed courtyard. The windows rattled visibly. Sirius gave his best friend a grim smile, Disillusioned himself and the bike, then drove straight up the side of the house and launched into the sky.

Contrary to popular belief, the Weasley twins didn't read each others' minds. Once a plan was laid, they worked together like two well-oiled cogs, creating the illusion of some otherworldly connection, but that was merely a product of years and years of teamwork. They'd learned long ago that the secret to making their hijinks look so effortless was to plan them relentlessly beforehand.

Similarly, when the twins held conversations with *other people*, they were so synchronized in their moods and opinions that it was irrelevant which of them spoke at any given time. They didn't *have* to finish each other's sentences, but they *chose* to, because they enjoyed watching peoples' reactions. And if one twin happened to think of something before the other, well, each of them had long since perfected the art of playing along.

In private, however, the twins split into Fred and George, distinct and separate entities. This morning, they had closed their shop and were busy in the fabled Back Room, Reducing a great deal of their stock and shipping it to Hogwarts via Owl Post. With their hands occupied with busy work, and no employees to distract them, they were free to have a serious discussion.

"Heads up!" said George, tossing a Dungbomb at his brother's back.

Without dropping the miniaturized crate of Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, Fred whipped his other hand into the air and closed it into a fist. The Dungbomb was arrested in midair, surrounded by a glowing blue sphere that contained the stinky contents when the thing exploded an instant later. Setting down the crate, Fred raised his wand and Vanished the whole sphere.

"Nicely done," said George.

Fred grinned. "Been getting pointers from Elias Ravenclaw. You?" Without batting an eye, Fred lobbed a Portable Swamp capsule at his brother. George attempted to catch it the same way, but wasn't quite fast enough. A gush of sulfurous water and a frantic heron smacked into his shirt before he could plug the hole.

"Could do with a bit more," admitted George, Vanishing the swamp-ball and opening a window for the heron.

They worked in silence for a while, boxing up vials of Instant Darkness powder and Decoy Detonators. "You think these Daydream Charms?" Fred said thoughtfully as he cleared another shelf.

George shrugged. "If there's an owl to spare in the end, we'll pack them on." Fred nodded. They weren't the best weapon in their shop, but they might come in handy.

When every owl from their Shipping Department (a stolen chicken coop they'd nailed to the roof) was on its way, they prepared the crates they would carry personally. Much of it was still in the testing stage, too unstable to send by owl. They'd kept secret for just this occasion.

"Any word from Elias whether he'd like to manage our branch in Hogsmeade?" asked George as he carefully shrank a bin of Spell Slammers. Fred didn't answer right away, knowing the concentration his brother required for his task. They'd been working on the Slammers for months now and still didn't have them quite right, but time was up. Like their line of Shield Hats, the Slammers deflected oncoming hexes, but these also worked on the Cruciatus. The trouble, of course, was that the spell could just as easily ricochet and land on the next fellow.

"Not yet," said Fred when the box was surrounded by wards that would slowly constrict and shrink it. "I've not actually mentioned it to him." George looked up inquisitively. "Silly git wants to take a few N.E.W.T.s," Fred shrugged, furrowing his brow at the absurdity. "Been too distracted for serious business."

George shook his head with an indulgent smirk. "We ought to help him sort out his priorities, brother."

Fred nodded, lobbing another Portable Swamp at George's back, which he arrested in mid-air without even looking. Not so much as whiff of decay escaped the blue sphere this time. "He'll catch on. Where've you been sending all those, by the way?"

Smiling brightly, George chirped, "Percy's flat."

"Me too." Fred returned the smile. They were in peak form for what lay ahead.

"I tole yeh teh clear out!"

The centaur Bane cocked his head and eyed the gamekeeper disdainfully. "We will not abandon our home."

Hagrid rolled his eyes and threw up his arms in exasperation. "Yeh great idiot, yer home's about ter become a battlefiel'. All the Sasquatch giants're gonna be Portkeyin' right here."

Bane turned his head with a disdainful sneer. "We care nothing for an unwanted war that you brought to our doorstep."

Utterly ignoring the arrows pointed at his chest, Hagrid stomped straight up to Bane, bellowing into the centaur's face. "Yer doorstep? *Yers*? Jus' whose wards have yeh been livin' under, Bane?" He spun angrily to the next centaur. "Magorian? Who's kep' yeh safe an' sound all these years? Never ask yeh fer nothin', while he kep' yeh from answerin' teh You-Know-Who?" Hagrid threw up his hands in disgust. "I never seen sucha ungrateful buncha... ingrates! 'Brought it to yer doorstep.' Yer all high'n mighty 'bout 'unwanted war,' well, we don' exactly wannit either, yeh know! But it beats becomin' slaves ter You-Know-Who!"

Hagrid paused, glaring around the group, his enormous fists clenched tight and pressed to his hips. Some of the younger centaurs glanced at one another furtively, but the old stallions maintained their haughty gaze. They remained silent, however, and Hagrid wasn't quite finished with them. "Wonder what'll happen teh yer fores' if *he* takes over?" he muttered darkly, then abruptly turned his back to the centaurs. He continued his prior task, clearing the "staging area" of prickly shrubs by blasting them to bits with bolts of energy from his pink umbrella, pointedly ignoring the herd.

All the centaurs, however, were watching the lead stallions. Some of the archers lowered their bows. Others shuffled their hooves in the undergrowth, swishing their tails in anxiety. One started to rear, but caught himself in the act and forced his forelegs back down, his face red with humiliation.

The centaur Ronan slowly approached Hagrid, halting when they were shoulder to shoulder. "Tell me this," he said. "Right now, where is the phoenix?"

Hagrid stopped firing his umbrella but did not lower it. "Fawkes? 'E's in London, boun' ter his perch. What about it?"

A wave of nervous jitters passed through the herd, and several centaurs struggled with the instinct to rear. Bane and Magorian held each others' gaze for some time. The lead stallion finally raised his hand slowly over his head, then twisted it twice. The herd abruptly broke their broad semicircle formation and scattered into the trees at full gallop.

Scowling, Hagrid glared at the only remaining centaur in the meadow. Magorian raised his head high. "The stars foretell of an hour in which the master of this castle cannot defend it. When its fate will be determined by its stewards." He peered shrewdly at the half-giant. "It is fitting that we repay his hospitality."

As the centaur sprinted out of the meadow, Hagrid furrowed his brows, then shrugged. "Bout time, is all I hafta say," he grumbled, setting back to work on the brambles.

Voldemort hated mornings like this--and every morning here was the same, or worse. In other words, cold. He wished once again that he'd built his enclave in an African jungle, or better yet, a desert. His body had become far too reptilian to tolerate this climate.

Severus had suggested this location, and he'd been right, as usual. *If I'm to make Hogwarts my permanent home, I can't become acclimated to basking in the sun.* Besides, deserts had been crossed, jungles had been burned, but the Siberian steppes had always resisted invasion. And as much as Voldemort despised the very thought

of it, he needed a safe hideaway to build and prepare his army.

*Potter!* Even with Dumbledore out of the way, that green-eyed insect was still nagging him. He was absolutely certain the child had something to do with Black's resurrection. *Black! And Lupin!* How dare they remain alive all this time? Their Order of the Pipsqueaks had taken on a whole new dimension. He was meeting effective resistance around the entire world--the world that should have been *his* decades ago. Was he not the most powerful wizard ever to live? He'd conquered Death itself, by Jove--which was far more than that fool Dumbledore could say. Albus might have a Chocolate Frog card bragging of his achievements, but he was also cold in his grave.

"No point in brooding over history," he reminded himself. Bellatrix had been captured and the troops were demoralized. He needed to divert their attention, to remind them who they served, and why.

He was pondering such matters of state when Lucius Malfoy poked his head in the door. "My lord," he said with his usual icy politeness. Voldemort nodded that he could continue. "We've received an envoy."

Malfoy's breath turned to mist. The Dementors must have just finished their patrol. As usual, the man was well-rehearsed in his delivery--there was no telling from his voice whether the news came from friend or enemy. *Always testing me, aren't you, Lucius?* he thought with mild displeasure, then raised his wand for a wordless glance into the wizard's mind.

"Your house elf," Voldemort drawled aloud, deliberately ranking his doorman. He hadn't punished Malfoy enough for that diary business, but he'd been forced to rein himself in. It wouldn't do, advertising the fact that the diary had been *THAT* important. Once Potter was dead and the Dark empire established, he could finally turn his proper attention to Lucius, but that day had not yet come.

"He bears a message from the Order of the Phoenix, and will deliver it to you alone," said Malfoy without the slightest strain in his oily voice, but he couldn't hide the twitch in his temple. Voldemort smiled. *Are you frightened or humiliated?* he wondered idly. He didn't really care. As long as Lucius was unhappy, that would do.

"Cut off his head and Owl it to Remus Lupin."

"Very good, my lord," said Malfoy and departed.

He was mildly curious about their message, but he wouldn't accept it from a servant. If the werewolf wanted to talk, he could bloody well propose a summit meeting. But Voldemort barely had time to pick up his quill when the snap of Disapparation disturbed the quiet. The creature had the nerve to land right on his table and address him at eye level.

"You don't turn me away, Mr. Riddle," said the elf, wagging an insolent finger. "I has a message from the Order for you."

Voldemort snorted. This was so absurd it was actually funny. "You has?" he mocked. "And you has learned to use the pronoun 'I,' though your mastery of verbs remains limited. Perhaps I shall keep you on a chain, orc, and merely send your tongue back to the Order." He raised his wand to cast the *Incarcerous*, but the spell caught in his throat.

The elf was holding out a photograph of *his* locket, *his* cup, and *his* red book, laid out at the foot of the marble stairs of Hogwarts. A Dark Mark wove itself in the air above them, and Sirius Black stood on the next step, poised to crush the locket with his heel.

"Or perhaps you're out of time, Mr. Riddle," said Dobby calmly, and vanished with a loud crack.

As the Forbidden Forest began to overflow with Giants, the castle itself filled with wizards, arriving in clusters of five to eight around a Portkey. Arthur Weasley stood on one of the more sedentary staircases, earnestly scouting the Great Hall below for his wife. He chewed nervously at a thumbnail. Messengers from the Ministry kept dashing up to deliver reports, and though he did his best to concentrate, his gaze flicked automatically to each new group as they popped into existence.

In some ways, he hoped she wouldn't make it before they had to seal the castle, even though he knew she'd charge the rear flank of the Dark Army if she couldn't meet them head-on.

He was interrupted from scanning by a huge, silvery-white wild turkey that whooshed in from above, making him leap back from the banister. "Don't do that!" he grumbled irritably at the Patronus. "Nearly gave me a coronary. Well, what is it?"

The turkey opened its little beak, but instead of gobbling, it spoke in Sirius Black's voice. "Molly's up here, in the Gryffindor common room. With her *sisters*." The turkey gave him a knowing look and faded into silvery wisps. Arthur charged up the stairs two at a time. The Aurors could handle things for a few minutes.

"Wobbles," he murmured in her ear when he made it through the portrait hole. She grinned bashfully and tugged him back out in the corridor.

"Oh, don't get all mushy on me, Arthur. I'm fine. I'm the one who should be worried--you're a much more popular target than I am!"

Arthur shook his head. "Not if anyone realizes what you girls are up to."

She waved at him, rolling her eyes. "They'll never make it all the way up here. Now you get back down to the Great Hall. You're the Minister, Arthur; people are looking for you. Go inspire them, or something."

Scoffing, he squashed his wife in a desperate hug. "Just stay near that Portkey. If they push us back to the third floor, I want every one of you Daughters out of here, understand? I don't care where you are in your enchantment."

They eyed each other knowingly, each one willing the other to keep out of danger, each one grimly determined to see their role through to the end. "Be careful, pet," Molly said to her husband, biting her lip as she returned through the portrait hole, because she knew such a request was impossible.

The common room hadn't changed at all since her own days in Gryffindor, though she'd never seen it quite so packed with witches. There were only two males present: Draco Malfoy, who gaped at all the red and gold trappings with guilty discomfort, and Sirius Black, flopped comfortably in an armchair with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, beaming like he'd gone straight to heaven. Molly chuckled. *Cheeky!*

She edged her way over to Draco and tousled the frowzy tufts of fine blond hair poking unevenly from his scalp. "Never thought you'd see the inside of this tower, did you, lad?"

He shook his head. His voice was rather squeaky when he finally mumbled, "I can't believe I'm back in Hogwarts, full stop."

"Ah, ah!" She wagged an insistent finger at him. "None of that, now. You've earned your way back--we don't need remorse today. Remember why we're here!"

Draco bowed his head and inhaled deeply. "Yes, ma'am," he said, his voice already steadier.

She patted his shoulder kindly. Molly was proud of him. Draco had wanted no more to do with magic, snapping his ruined wand himself and casting the pieces into the fire where they burned with a sickly green. But anyone knowledgeable about phoenixes knew that Fawkes's fire would have killed the young wizard if he was beyond redemption. She'd convinced Draco not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Draco had taken to Avallocian magic so naturally, just like Fabian... She forced herself to halt that train of thought. Grief and remorse had no place in Gryffindor Tower

today.

"He's back!"

Ron had been stationed in the kitchens to await Dobby's return, and he was supposed to send up a Patronus to the Great Hall when the elf arrived. He ran up the stairs instead, hauling Dobby along by the arm.

The group around the staff table whirled as one to appraise the newcomers. Dobby's eyes were even wider than usual, and he looked several shades too pale. He held his head triumphantly high, however, and spoke clearly, albeit shakily.

"It was just as you said, Master Weasley. They was making me to wait, and I listened with the Wizarding Ears. Mr. Riddle told... *Mr. Malfoy* to cut off my head and post it back." His skinny fingers clamped the back of the nearest chair. "So I was popping right to his desk and showing him the photograph."

"And? Did he say anything?" urged Professor McGonagall.

Dobby shuddered. "I didn't stay long enough to be finding out, Headmistress. He took one look at the photograph and his eyes flared up like coals before the bellows, and I'm thinking, 'Time for a hasty retreat.'" The house-elf cringed apologetically.

"You did the right thing, Dobby," said Arthur Weasley with a kind nod. "No wizard could have gone through those wards to take a message to Voldemort--or lived to tell about it." Dobby's color returned and he gazed at his mismatched socks with humility, but said nothing.

This was just as well, for the mood in the room had sombered. The witches and wizards exchanged hard glances and set their jaws. They had drawn a line in the sand. War was coming.

Voldemort sealed off his chambers first, then the entire hallway, and began to pace. He hadn't anticipated this. Never. He'd fretted about it many times, which is why he'd taken lengths to hide the Horcruxes so diligently, and to exterminate that fool Slughorn. But Slughorn had eluded his grasp, and there were always more important things to attend--or so it seemed at the time.

"How DARE he?" Voldemort exclaimed, grabbing his writing table and flipping it over with a smash. Slughorn was supposed to be too self-absorbed to remember the casual question about multiple Horcruxes, from all those years ago. If he remembered, he was supposed to be too simple-minded to understand its significance. If he understood, he was supposed to be too cowardly to incriminate himself by speaking of it.

The Dark wizard snapped suddenly to a halt. Dumbledore had brought Slughorn to Hogwarts. Of course. There was seemingly no end to that man's interference.

Voldemort resumed pacing. He must assume the signet ring had been discovered and destroyed. He'd suspected this ever since the thing went missing, but without proof, he'd dared to reassure himself it had probably been stolen solely for its value as a Slytherin artifact. But if Dumbledore managed to collect those others, you could bet he'd found the ring.

Dumbledore! Even in death, the old coot was tormenting him. Potter and Black could never have found those Horcruxes on their own. The Red Book had been stashed in the most unassuming of places, while the locket had been utterly secured in the cave. The Malfoy boy must have betrayed the cup; there was simply no other explanation. Why, only one Horcrux remained absolutely secure!

There was nothing for it. The Dark Lord needed to retrieve his property.

Winky hiccupped and eyed Dobby with contempt. "You is the wickedest house-elf ever," she snarled.

Dobby looked up from the hauberk he was trying to put on. Though small, as if it had been made for a child, the mail shirt was still too large for him. He was determined to wear it, though. You couldn't just go into battle dressed in everyday clothes--especially not this battle.

"Oh, you doesn't know a thing," he chided. "Hold this," he said, handing her one of the sleeves. It was made out of the finest white silver rings and weighed less than a feather--yet was as tough as dragon scales. Despite its beauty and craftsmanship, Winky took it between two reluctant fingers like a piece of moldy old bread.

"Winky knows you be not only wearing clothes, you's going fighting in a Wizard war," she scorned. "You's gone clear round the bend, you has. Not any sort of normal elf at all."

Dobby rolled his eyes, glad she wasn't aware he'd been *reading*, too. His peers would probably stone him to death if word got out. Yet it was precisely because of reading that he was now gearing up to face death in battle. *Funny how ideas gets you into so much trouble*, he mused as he finally popped his head through the correct hole.

"This war isn't just about wizards," he corrected her irritably as he threaded his arm carefully into a sleeve. "It goes further than that. Do you know why house-elves serves the wizards, Winky?"

She sniggered in disbelief. "That's what we *does*, you numbskull. We's always serving wizards!"

"Not always," Dobby countered firmly. "We once fought against them. No, it's true!" he responded to her look of utter shock at his heretical claim. "We was forced to battle all kinds of good wizards and men, until we was setted free from a terrible master. Even after that, some of our kind fought on their owns. But many understood they was wrong. Wrong to be serving the Dark One. They was grateful to the wizards for setting them bang to rights again. So they was vowing to serve good this time, out of gladness."

Winky was having none of this blasphemy. She smacked him with the end of his own sleeve. "You is full of it," she snarled.

He smiled wryly. "I's full of something," he agreed somewhat cryptically. "But I knows it's true. We *can* fight against wizards. We was doing it before, on the wrong side. Today I's fighting on the right side, Winky. I wishes you would, too. For honor."

He might as well have asked her to cut off her own foot and serve it to the headmistress. "There's no honor in fighting our masters," she said matter-of-factly. "You is just bringing more shame on us--you and your *clothes*, and your *wages*."

Even though Dobby had only been reading for six months, he'd learned a great deal. "So you says," he ceded quietly. He picked up the small sword that had hung beside the shirt of mail in the attic above the Headmaster's office. It glowed blue in his hand. "Tomorrow maybe will tell something else."

At that moment, a deep vibration shuddered through the stone foundations of the castle. Winky jumped and regarded him frightfully. "No needing to be scared just yet, missy," Dobby said reassuringly. "That was just sealing off the castle. No more Portkeys. There must be some Dark ones at the gate."

Winky eyed a nearby crate of butterbeer with desperation. "Oh no you doesn't!" Dobby snapped. "Not after all your talk of I bringing shame on all of us! They's needing lots of service real soon. You keeps your head on straight!"

Winky gave the crate a last longing glance, then smartly straightened the dishtowel she was wearing and stalked back to the kitchen. Dobby was right about one thing: they had an army to feed.

Alastor Moody glared at the crowd of anxious wizards rushing to join him atop the Astronomy Tower. Without exception, every one of them had scanned the balmy blue sky, then rushed to the parapet to examine the grounds... and then turned to him with a scowl. He held his ground until there were no more pounding feet on the stairwell,



then addressed everyone at once, simply by tapping on his magical eye.

"Dementors," he added gruffly. "In two minutes." He turned and stared intently at the eastern horizon. If anyone begrudged Moody's slightly early closure of the castle's borders, they could keep it to themselves.

Soon all could see it, a gray cloud advancing far more quickly than any natural phenomenon. The landscape beneath it took on a dismal, yellowish hue, in stark contrast to the fresh spring greens gleaming in the sunlight to either side. The air began to cool.

"Will they hold?" someone asked breathlessly. Pointlessly, in Moody's opinion. The wards were the best they could set, but obviously they wouldn't last forever. Even Dumbledore hadn't been able to keep the foul things completely off the grounds.

The cloud came to an abrupt halt at the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. Bolts of lightning arced to the ground, following the contours of the magical wards. Seconds later, the thunder reached the tower, mingled with the incensed wails of the Dementors. "That set them off!" Moody observed staunchly, then noticed he had no audience. He glowered at the sorcerers instinctively backing towards the stairs. "Oh, do get hold of yourselves!"

He turned back to the eastern border and raised his wand to reinforce the wards, hoping some of his colleagues could master their fear. "For Harry," said a voice in the crowd. Moody smiled.

Though it was hot and stuffy inside Gryffindor Tower, the windows remained closed against the clash of combat and the advancing presence of Dementors. Dark Giants had waded past the wards and were rekindling old grudges with the expatriates, while more civilized Sasquatch Giants were taking quite a beating. Fortunately, they far outnumbered their opponents, and three "soft" Giants could more than stand up to one scrappy enemy. The Whomping Willow had joined the fray and was mostly dispatching Dark Giants, though not so much out of loyalty as the fact that the Order had strongly warned their forces to steer clear of the tree.

Human combatants would have appeared small as ants from the tower, but this battle could be seen quite clearly. Most of the Daughters of Modron (and one Son) were pacing, fidgeting, or otherwise discharging nervous energy about the common room. Sirius Black, however, was the picture of serenity, chatting up a veritable coven of fair, anxious witches.

Draco couldn't stand it any longer. He took a detour past the couch and hissed, "Why don't we start?" into his cousin's ear.

Black caught his wrist and swung the younger man around the chair, tugging him down to sit on a low table. "Far too early. We're only the bait, remember? Voldemort has to believe there's a chance he can recover them. Otherwise there's no point in wasting his time attacking. He'd be better off to take the loss and make more."

Draco rubbed his brow, attempting to thwart an oncoming headache. "But how do you *know*? Potter might already--"

"If *Harry* was in position," he interrupted pointedly, "the Dark Army would be racing back to Siberia." Black's mien relaxed. "Besides, you know how far they had to walk. It's what, two AM where Harry is now? We'll start the enchantment around midnight, when he and Tura are back on the road. They should arrive at the keep by sunrise here. Go upstairs and get some sleep, Draco," he added kindly.

Draco nodded listlessly and slouched into a chair by the window. Presently he noticed a distinct chill spilling from the glass. Flashes of red and green light suddenly dotted the eastern borders.

"The Death Eaters broke through," he said, but not a sound left his lips.

"Do we still spare Potter for His Lordship?" said Amicus Carrow after he charged through the breach in the wards.

Rabastan Lestrange clenched his fists visibly in response. "You need to ask? Now? Did you pay *any* attention to the Master's instructions?"

Carrow whirled back around to face him. "Aren't you all high and mighty!" he sneered. "Specially for someone on the front lines. Now that Bella's gone, your name means nothing to the Master. You're out here to die."

"Yet I'm not alone, am I?" Lestrange snarled. "I noticed you're here too. See if you can't--"

Amicus Carrow might have interrupted with a snide remark, but he never had a chance. An arrowhead was poking from the center of his throat. There were some bubbling, choking sounds, then silence. A centaur stepped out of the trees, another arrow already nocked and drawn.

Not another soul was in sight. The Death Eaters were ordered to penetrate the wards by splitting into pairs and finding weak spots. Lestrange processed the situation in an instant. There was no one to witness his next move, no one to carry word of his actions back to the Dark Lord. Lestrange was a coward, but he was a smart coward. He dropped to his knees. "I surrender," he said evenly.

The centaur simply stared at him, motionless.

"Come now! Don't tell me you're as thick as the one you just disposed of!" he spat. "I *surrender*. I'm your prisoner now. Take me up to the castle and turn me over to the wizards. They'll decide what to do with me." *None of which will involve the Cruciatus or death--with any luck they'll send me to the dungeons.* He knew the Order had no soldiers to spare. If they assigned anyone at all to guard him, it would be someone useless for battle--someone he could easily murder. Then he could disappear in the warren of passages within Slytherin House, and invent some appropriate alibis.

The centaur met his eyes, and with a cold gasp Lestrange realized that there were no witnesses to the archer's actions, either.

There was the barest flicker of motion. A thin wood shaft seemed to pop into existence just under his nose, three feathers fletched along its axis. Lestrange saw it, had just enough time to marvel at the oddity, then fell dead.

The chill was almost unbearable. Neville leaped uneasily over the wrist of an unconscious giant. Tonks could really move when she set her mind to it. He had to push himself to keep up.

"To the north!" she shouted over her shoulder. He saw the flock of dementors, a dark vortex of tatters and streaks whirling above the Divination tower. He raised his wand. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A dozen shining toads sprang from his wand and bounded spiritedly toward their target. Tonks flashed him a thumbs-up.

A silvery Jack Russell terrier scampered into the sky to their left. Neville darted behind the rock. "Ron and Luna," he panted, pointing at the Patronus. Tonks nodded, still catching her breath.

"You see any Death Eaters?" she presently asked.

He shook his head. "Just passed-out giants. But I saw some wandlight by the lake. We should back up Ron."

"No," she declared firmly. "It must've been a reflection--there's no way they'd be coming across the lake yet. If there *are* any hostiles about, they'll be in front of us, here. We need to hold our own. Forward!"

Neville bit his lip, but he followed her into their assigned zone. She was right. Their duty was to hold the enemy back from the castle until morning, if possible. A hint of sunset filtered through the area just vacated by the Dementors. It was going to be a long night.

A similar conversation was taking place a few hundred meters away. "They're fine, Luna! Probably worried about us! So stop fretting already!"

"I don't fret, pet," she said warmly. "But as long as it's quiet, it seems like we ought to--"

"Ssst!" hissed Ron, stepping suddenly away and motioning for her to duck down.

Luna flopped obediently onto her belly, just as a bolt of green energy scorched over her. Ron pointed his wand into the shadows and mouthed, "Expelliarmus!"

A wand whipped through the air, accompanied by an angry tirade. Ron grinned at Luna, but froze when he saw her look of intense concentration. *Nolo Gravitiae!* she murmured, her wand slashing violently upward. There was a puffing sound, then a swirling mist gushed from the ground ahead. Other voices joined the first, trying to find a way out of the bank of fog.

Ron gaped at Luna. "Anti-Gravity Mist," she whispered brightly from the grass. "That should keep them busy for a bit. I'm pretty sure there's another band of them just to the left, though." A twig snapped somewhere in that direction, confirming her suspicion.

Ron dropped where he stood. This was bad. These Death Eaters must have crossed the lake; wasn't someone supposed to be guarding the far side? *Doesn't matter now*, he thought. *They're here, and we're in a Hot Zone.* He crawled through the tangled undergrowth to Luna's side. "There's a breach somewhere," he whispered. "They shouldn't be so close. We've got to warn the castle!"

Luna nodded, delicately raising a finger to her lips for silence. Only seconds later, a pair of booted feet tromped into view beyond the brush, not three meters distant.

"Keep your eyes peeled," said a low voice. Another, further away, began calling instructions into the mist, guiding the enshrouded Death Eaters to the exit.

A look that almost resembled alarm appeared on Luna's face, while there was no mistaking it on Ron's. He carefully showed her three fingers, trying not to move too quickly. She gave her head the tiniest shake and pointed with two fingers at four different spots along an arc in front of them.

*Eight enemies!* He raised his brows to ask if she was sure. Luna scrunched her lips into a pout; her answer was clearly, "Would I lie about this?" There were at least three more floundering about in the mist. Once they were freed, things would become very grim, very quickly.

The boots took a step closer. It was dark, but not *that* dark. They were only seconds from being spotted. Ron gave her his sternest look, hoping she would understand: *Stay down!*

Suddenly it was as though the sun burst through the clouds, but it was already past sunset. During the instant it took Ron's eyes to adjust, the owner of the boots crumpled to the ground. Noise and chaos everywhere: thudding sounds as objects struck the ground nearby, the shouts of the Death Eaters, and a roaring sound from above...

An oddly familiar roar, and familiar voices whooping...

"Oi! Laying about again?"

Ron froze, but Luna was already on her feet. "Hello, Fred!" She cheerfully took the hand reaching down from the rusty Ford Anglia floating at shoulder level. "Get in, Ronald!" she chided gently after clambering into the back seat, then chirped, "Hello, George!"

"Our pleasure," said George from behind the steering wheel. "Pardon a moment" he said, lobbing another projectile through the window at a Death Eater in the headlights. It landed with a distinctive thud at the witch's feet, where it burst open like a clamshell and released a puff of pink vapor.

Ron was only halfway in the car when George hit the gas and launched them into the air, flipping off the headlights. "Hold a moment!" Ron squealed, but Fred merely grabbed the back of his pants and hauled him into the car.

"Always were slow, Ronnie," he said. "Amazing you've made such a good Keeper."

Ron was sputtering a reply when Luna effortlessly changed the subject. "Where'd this wonderful Ford come from?"

"We were out setting traps in the Forbidden Forest," began Fred.

"Won't be anyone getting through *there* anytime soon," noted George confidentially.

"... and our dear old Anglia approached us," said Fred fondly.

"Very social creatures, cars," added George.

"Needed a bit of polishing, didn't you?" Fred asked, giving the dashboard an affectionate pat.

"So we thought we'd do with an aerial assault," said George.

"He who controls the skies controls the war," Fred observed sagely.

"Very handy for dropping MunDung bombs," said George, swerving suddenly toward a flash of wandlight off to their left. "Something special we cooked up. Same principle as a Dung bomb, except--"

"--rather than stink, they turn the unfortunate victim into a compulsive kleptomaniac." Fred scooped up a handful of grenades from a box on the front seat and began tossing them out the window.

"One whiff and they'll steal pebbles from the ground--"

"Or pull every leaf off the nearest tree," concluded Fred as he settled back on the seat with a satisfied grin. "Keeps them occupied for at least an hour." Below them, little pink clouds blossomed briefly, presumably sending some Death Eaters into a hoarding frenzy.

"Strong work," Ron said, then clambered over the seat to displace George from behind the wheel. "Give over!" he said firmly, ignoring the twins' protests. "My girlfriend's in this car; there's no way I'm letting you drive."

By ten o'clock, the flashes of magic had come no closer, but were steadily increasing in number all around the grounds. Sirius finally lost his composure and was pacing before the windows, wringing his hands.

Molly Weasley had pulled her chair right in front of the portrait hole. She raised her hand forbiddingly before he could open his mouth. "You chose to be here, Sirius," she reminded him sternly. "You can't back out now."

"But--"

Her hand clamped down over his mouth. "Your time's coming. This was your choice!" She gazed at him sadly. "To finish your brother's work. We need you here, Sirius."

He whirled away, stamping his foot in frustration. He knew better than to argue, but every green jet of light below made him wince. People were fighting for their lives, and

he was just *sitting here* in the tower...

"No buts!" said Molly as he whirled back around to face her.

She left her armchair and put a matronly arm around him. "Do you think it's easy for me to sit while all seven of my children are out there? And Arthur?" She clicked her teeth. "Even so, not one of them would change places with me--or you. Ours is the nasty work."

She gave him a knowing look and continued in a lighter tone. "I think I know why the Lady favors you. Some call her the 'Starlight Lady,' you know. I reckon she's one of your ancestors--and that's why all the Blacks are named after stars or constellations."

Sirius paused to consider that a moment. "You really think so? But the Blacks have been Dark for generations!"

Molly shrugged. "Well, there's always a few bad apples." She smiled. "Come on. Might as well start the ritual. All the foul magic around the castle will slow things down anyway."

A lamp filled with oil smashed into the far wall of the barracks, immediately starting a smoky fire on the stones. Lucius Malfoy doused it discreetly while the Master raged.

"I will behead every Giant on the North American continent," Voldemort snarled, pacing. It was not in Malfoy's nature to feel empathy, particularly toward other Death Eaters, but he couldn't help but pity the wretch cowering before His Lordship. It wasn't Yaxley's fault that Hogwarts was well-defended.

Voldemort whirled to Malfoy. "What of Fenrir's troops?"

"Ready to Apparate, my lord," purred Lucius soothingly. "He kept them hungry but under control last night, so they'd be ready for a repeat performance. All but a few have transformed back to human; the first wave can attack on your command."

Voldemort turned back to the courier. "Tell the vanguard to withdraw from the grounds. Send Fenrir first, then his 'men.' I'd like him well within the wards before moonrise." Yaxley gave a single clipped bow and darted off, sweat beading all along his forehead.

Voldemort sighed, then idly repaired the lamp he'd smashed. "Lucius," he said quietly. "Although I would wish otherwise, I fear we'll have to unleash all our forces."

Malfoy nodded. "Between the beasts and the Inferi, many beautiful things will be destroyed."

The Dark Lord sighed again, heaving his shoulders. "I know. There's nothing for it, though. I can't let them get away with this. I *must* take Hogwarts now."

Wishing he'd taken five precious minutes to beat the message out of that cursed house-elf, Malfoy smiled encouragingly at Voldemort. "You will, my lord. We'll have Potter, Weasley, Black, and the others routed by this time tomorrow."

Voldemort peered at him coldly, then smirked. "Indeed. Yes 'we' will," he

sneered. "I suggest you prepare, Lucius--you'll be leading the Inferi in at dawn, GMT." The blond aristocrat did a good job covering his shock, but not completely. "Must have my best men at the helm," he added patronizingly. "I know you won't fail me again."

Malfoy nodded just as Yaxley had and left. He understood the Master completely. Victory was the only option. Victory or death.

He wished he could talk to Severus.

The man clamped a hand over her mouth and whispered into her ear until he was sure she wouldn't scream. "Don't DO that!" Hermione hissed.

"Sorry," he whispered back. "Vasn't much choice." Viktor leaned his broomstick against a tree and crouched beside her. "Nothing to see at moment," he reported. "There is group of three up there--" he pointed "--pawing on ground for rocks. I hope Veasleys brought many of pink bombs."

Hermione nodded. So far, the battle had consisted mostly of defense against Dementors. Pity there was no way to destroy the horrible things, but really, once you had your Patronus, they were only a nuisance. The Giants apparently hadn't expected any resistance and had fought fiercely, but they never made it far enough to threaten the castle. And thus far, the Death Eaters had been kept at bay.

The round, golden moon rising in the east, however, could only bring trouble.

Viktor followed her gaze. "They von't dare," he said. "Vere-oofs are too unreliable for veapons. Vill turn on friends and enemies." Despite his comments, he reached for his broom and kept it in hand.

"I don't like this," Hermione said uneasily. "Too quiet. I haven't sent off a Patronus in fifteen minutes." She scowled at the moon, dull and heavy as it crested the horizon. "They're planning something."

As if in response, a canine howl broke out in the distance and was cut off with a sudden yelp.

Viktor mounted the broom and yanked her to his chest in an instant, but Hermione gave him a mighty shove. "Settle!" she hissed. "I'm not leaving unless we've no choice."

"Choice vill be mine," Viktor growled stubbornly, but loosened his grip. Another howl issued from a new direction, closer to the main gates. They stood back-to-back, wands at the ready. The air turned chill.

At the same moment, they turned to each other in comprehension. A coordinated attack! By defending themselves against the Dementors, their Patronus would give their position away to the werewolves. Viktor gestured silently with his hand, bringing the broomstick up beneath them.

Hermione stomped on his foot, scowling. "When did you become such a chicken?" she whispered.

"Ven I fell in love vith insane fearless girl," he said simply, reluctantly releasing her waist once again.

They turned as one to the sound of cracking foliage, but soon spotted Tonks on the move, and waved her down. "Wotcher!" she panted cheerfully. "Reckon we'll see some canine action pretty quick!"

"I don't suppose Professor Lupin taught you any tricks for handling them?" Hermione asked.

Tonks bent over to catch her breath. "Only that the silver bullet business is a myth. Pure rubbish," she added, straightening back up as Neville finally arrived. "Cutting off their heads'll do nicely." They all stared at her. "What?" she squawked. "These hounds aren't like my Remus. They're with Greyback! More animal than man anymore."

"Is right," said Viktor grimly. "Killing may be only defense. If you do not have stomach, take broom and go back to castle," he said, though his tone was kindly, not provocative.

Hermione started to reply when Neville pointed frantically behind them. They felt it rather than hear it: a vibration in the earth, the pounding footfalls of a large, heavy creature.

The three younger sorcerers instinctively shrank back, but Tonks stepped up, whipping something from inside her robe and tossing it to the ground. With a flick of her

wand, there was the characteristic whoosh of a magical expansion. She leaned forward and put her foot on the thing she'd enlarged.

"Mental!" gasped Neville. "She means to become like Lupin!"

Tonks, however, snapped suddenly upright, the handle of a ripcord in her hand. There was a tremendous rumbling roar, and she picked up the object and brandished it with both hands.

The wizards continued to gape, but Hermione immediately launched a Patronus. The silvery light of her otter illuminated the chain saw as Tonks whirled it onto the head of the lead wolf.

## 43B: The Battle of Many Armies, Continued

*Chapter 44 of 50*

As the title suggests, the battle at Hogwarts rages on.

Percy snapped the photograph and dashed out of the Gryffindor common room. Molly shook her head. "You're laying it on too thick," she said, clicking her teeth.

Sirius shrugged, tossing the golden cup irreverently onto the nearest table. "Until he's knocking on the door, it's not thick enough." She eyeballed him skeptically, but said no more.

He flopped onto the couch beside Draco, smiling broadly. "Besides, this was the chance of a lifetime." Draco glowered at him through emerald eyes. "Ho ho!" barked Sirius, tousling his cousin's unruly black hair. "Good thing Harry wasn't born a Malfoy! He could stop trains with that glare."

"There's a bit of Polyjuice left, if you're so fond of this look," said Draco sullenly.

"And mess with perfection?" Sirius said, snickering.

Arthur couldn't help but keep a paternal eye on Bill. Greyback was on the grounds somewhere--Bill could feel it. His fists clenched and the cords in his neck tightened at every howl. "Are you sure you're up for this?" he asked his son for the millionth time.

"Enough, Da. Let it rest."

They continued to patrol their section of the perimeter, but it seemed more and more like a waste of time. The Dark Army had sent the werewolves to do their dirty work, and no Death Eater was fool enough to risk his skin with packs on the loose. There was a distant rumbling sound to the east, which neither of them could identify, but it seemed to be attracting a steady stream of howling wolves.

The wind shifted presently, bringing Bill to a sudden halt. Arthur froze too, scanning the surroundings, his wand at the ready. "What is it?" he finally asked in the barest whisper.

Bill cleared his throat. "Blood. Lots of it." Without giving his father another look, he dashed across the meadow, following his nose.

Arthur nearly bowled them both over when Bill stopped again. "A pack," he panted. "They're circling." The rumbling sound roared anew, along with some yelps and shouts. "What in blue blazes is going ON up there?"

Shrugging, Arthur wished he hadn't read the riot act to Fred and George. That blasted Anglia would come in very handy right now.

A silvery dolphin that probably belonged to one of the twins began capering through the air over the source of the sounds and smells. When it faded, Charlie's unmistakable Patronus, a Welsh Green dragon, began chasing its tail over the treetops. Bill and Arthur regarded one another, puzzled. "Family reunion?" mused Bill.

"I didn't get the memo," Arthur said, shaking his head. "They seem... all right. Their Patronuses are certainly... frisky."

They watched Charlie's dragon for a few moments, growing more and more curious, until Bill noticed a speck of wandlight moving away from the gathering. He nudged his father on the elbow and hopped onto his broomstick, catching up to the wand's owner in short order. It was Hermione Granger, stomping toward the castle with a livid expression. "Hello, Bill," she said, though her tone was not particularly friendly.

"Hello. Um, what's going on?"

The witch stopped and pointed her wand at the clump of trees. "You don't want to know. Trust me." She crossed her arms and clamped her lips shut.

By then Arthur had caught up to them. Utterly baffled, he put his hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave her an exasperated look that he normally reserved for his twin sons. "Hermione, not now. Tell me what's happening."

She threw her hands up in disgust. "It's a slaughterhouse! You know, the Death Eaters might as well be taking names, or have a little sign-up table in the back. They can't help themselves under the moonlight, some of them might be--"

Mr. Weasley silenced her with a pained grimace. "Hold on, now. Who's slaughtering whom?"

With an annoyed huff, Hermione started over. "Basically, it's Tonks on slaying. The rest are guiding them in with the Patronuses, or stunning them to slow them down until Tonks can--"

"Them who? Who them?" queried Bill.

"The werewolves, of course!" When this announcement didn't incite any cries of moral outrage, Hermione scowled anew. "She's just killing them! Without any thought to who they are during the day! SHE, of all people!"

Bill and his father eyed each other uneasily. "They're Dark soldiers during the day..." began Mr. Weasley, but Hermione's eyes narrowed to slits and his voice withered and fell silent.

"Oh, you're all the same!" she spat furiously. "Go on then, go on up there. I'm sure they'll be placing bets any minute now. Don't miss out on the *fun*, by any means. Go on!" She waved them away, then whirled on her heel and stalked off toward the castle.

"She, uh, she shouldn't be alone," noted Bill weakly, and darted after her.

Arthur nodded. Bill despised Fenrir Greyback and all he stood for, but he also felt a certain primordial kinship with werewolves. Realizing abruptly that *he* shouldn't be alone either, Arthur mounted his broomstick and followed Hermione's original trail until he spotted some light among the trees.

It was quite a scene. A group of wizards huddled ahead, taking turns casting the Patronus charm. The silver glow revealed a ring of wolf carcasses. Tonks stood in the center, gleaming red and holding a Muggle device that was producing the rumbling sound. Apparently it was idling at the moment, as it was fairly quiet. Fred and George stood off by themselves, obviously attempting to Conjure or Transfigure one of their own. One of them held an eggplant bearing the word "Homelite" along its side.

"What's the meaning of this? You're supposed to be at your posts!" Arthur said to the first wizard he recognized, a young Auror from France who was a friend of Fleur. He had the decency to look embarrassed, but the fellow beside him, an Italian official, gestured for patience. "No one but-ah wolves on de grounds now," he said. "We modify our-ah defense so. De pack, it can-ah gang up on-ah one man. So we gang up too."

Arthur sighed. It made sense, and any strategy that kept their soldiers safe was a good one. But Hermione had a point: some of these werewolves might not have come willingly. They couldn't help themselves once they transformed, but by tomorrow, some of them could turn out to be allies. *What would Remus do?* he wondered.

Reckoning that Tonks was in the best position to answer that question, Arthur edged his way through the crowd. The ground became more and more slippery under his feet, but he made a point of not looking down. "Miss Tonks!" he said crisply, once he reached the edge of the group.

"Yes?" she snapped, barely turning her head.

"Everything under control?" Arthur asked, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Right as rain... sir," she chirped politely, still concentrating on the darkness in front of her.

"Only I've noticed things are a bit... extreme." He could feel the stares of the wizards behind him.

"Only as circumstances demand, sir." Her voice developed a distinct chill.

*What a quandary!* he mused. Of course she should defend herself and the castle, that went without saying. But this reeked of, well, *unfairness*. Some days, being Minister of Magic was no picnic. He stepped up behind her to speak more privately. "Perhaps, Nymphadora," he began, but never got to complete the thought.

In her usual fashion, Tonks glared at him when he used her first name. The instant she broke her concentration, two wolves charged out of the stand of trees just beyond the range of her chainsaw. Arthur Weasley only had time to glimpse his doom, in the form of the gaping jaws of a wolf launching for his throat. Before he could even brace for impact, however, a metallic flash arced across his nose and a dozen Stunning spells flew past him from behind.

The wolf fell dead at his feet as Tonks spun away to see to its partner. She was too late, though; the other wolf, having been knocked backwards by the spells, disappeared among the trees. Scowling, Tonks snapped upright and stared fixedly ahead once more. "You were saying, sir?" she drawled.

He cleared his throat, wishing very much that he could sit down. "Just, uh, just wondering if there was any other way to, uh, handle this situation. Perhaps something Mr. Lupin might, uh, recommend."

Though her eyes remained on the trees, she turned her head and scrunched her eyebrows wryly. "Who d'you think suggested the chain saw?"

Arthur jumped when a hand touched his shoulder, but it was only Charlie. "Come on, Da," said his son kindly. "We didn't start this war, but we have to finish it."

"I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good!" said Hermione. The Marauders Map appeared reluctant to unfold, as though it couldn't quite trust the sincerity of her statement, but it quickly relented and filled with names. Mad Eye Moody took it from her, his human eye wide with wonder.

"James Potter... he'd have made quite an Auror," the old man said, shaking his head. He pointed something out to Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Bound the *Aperio* with a *Soleum Veritas* counterjinx. Boy was a genius. Too bad he was too moneyed to work for a living."

Hermione blinked at that remark, but let it pass. She peered closely at the map, covered with quivering names like an anthill. It usually had a certain rapport with the viewer and showed only the names of persons of interest, but apparently there were too many strangers around for it to work at peak efficiency. "Who are we looking for, Professor Moody?"

His magic eye looked a bit dazzled as well. "Trouble," he finally replied, cryptically but firmly. "Dementors and wolves could just be a diversion. He wants his toys. Sending in a thief's the way to do it." He scrutinized every fold and flap of the Map closely, but finally set it aside.

Just as he did so, Ginny Weasley dashed into the Great Hall and announced, "Dobby's back."

The little elf looked worse than after his first trip to Siberia, but he came in on his own two feet. "I wasn't taking it to Mr. Riddle this time, sir," he said apologetically to Moody while twisting his ears dejectedly. "They's stepped up the wards on the barracks since this afternoon. I was having to stay outside. But I gived it to Mr. Malfoy when he came to the door."

Moody nodded kindly as Hermione and Ginny each took one of Dobby's hands and jiggled his ears until they unfurled. "Good job, lad," he said. "Just as well to let Lucius see it. Eh?" he grunted at the others when they regarded him quizzically. "The man's a sneak! He sees how bad his master wants those things, he'll try an' smuggle 'em out himself! If it comes to that, better in his hands than Voldemort's."

Exhausted witches began to falter, slumping out of the circle in the Gryffindor common room. New Daughters of Modron would take their places, but to no avail. The enchantment wasn't taking hold, despite all the singing and swaying.

"It's the Dementors," Draco muttered with contempt. "They're interfering with the magic, keeping the witches from connecting."

Sirius had lost his carefree demeanor and was pacing beside his young cousin. "We'll get some people on the roof, sending off Patronuses."

"Won't help, I don't think. They're not that close, even now--there's just too many all around us."

Sirius stared thoughtfully at the younger wizard. "Time to think up Plan B," he finally said.

"Here!" blurted Hermione, pointing to the Marauder's Map. "Greyback! In the castle!"

Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt bolted to the staff table in the Great Hall and followed her shaking hand. The werewolf's name was traveling through an apparently solid wall. "Secret passage--probably Unplottable," said Moody dourly. Kingsley nodded as he scooped up the map. "Good work, missy," Moody said as the two of them dashed out of the Hall and down the steps to the dungeons.

Hermione sat in dazed exhaustion. Most of the Order were now out on the grounds, roaming in small bands to engage the enemies. She'd spent hours poring over the

Marauder's Map, but obviously that duty was done, at least for the moment. With a guilty start, she realized she ought to keep moving, but she was so tired. She folded her arms on the staff table and set down her head for just a minute.

When she woke with a start, the Great Hall was completely dark and the ceiling was filled with stars.

*Good heavens!* Jumping up, she realized she couldn't have slept long--it had been very late when she "rested her eyes" and there was still no sign of dawn. *Half an hour at most*, she reassured herself guiltily, slipping quietly out of the Great Hall so as not to disturb the enchanted candles hovering unlit over the tables.

Her mouth felt dry and pasty, so she took a quick detour to freshen up. The entire first floor had been turned into a temporary infirmary, so Hermione climbed to the 2nd floor to find a bathroom. She was leaning over a sink, splashing cold water on her face, when she looked up, gasped, then scowled. Moaning Myrtle's face hovered beside her own in the mirror.

As she opened her mouth to rebuke the ghost for startling her, Hermione realized that Myrtle's eyes were wide with fright. The ghost put a finger to her lips for silence, pointing at the door. Turning slowly, Hermione could see a faint shadow from the corridor in the gap below the bathroom door. It moved slowly, then in jerks, as though cautiously scanning as it went along.

Turning only her eyes, Hermione regarded Myrtle. The ghost was crying silently and shivering. Hermione's wand was just inside her robes, but if that was Greyback outside, the rustle of the fabric might as well be a dog whistle.

Hermione twitched her eyebrows pointedly at the door, wanting Myrtle to create a diversion. She only needed a few seconds with her wand to bar the door. Kingsley and Moody had to be looking for the werewolf; if she sent off a Patronus, surely they'd arrive before he could break into the bathroom. A quick spectral swoop through the door, preferably with a haunting screech, would fit the bill perfectly.

Myrtle, however, didn't get the hint. She began to mouth the word "werewolf," obviously trying to be helpful, but utterly missing the point. "I *know*," mouthed Hermione back. "Go scare him," she said soundlessly, flicking her fingers toward the door. Myrtle looked confused, and made the motions of drying her hands. "You want a towel?" she seemed to ask.

The click of the wolf's claws on the flagstones was now audible, but he was proceeding at an even pace. The shadow widened, filled the doorway, then passed. Hermione relaxed slightly. A crash and a raucous laugh rang through the corridor. *Peeves!* she thought gratefully. Perfect timing. Another few seconds and she could--

The door to the bathroom flew violently open, making her leap involuntarily against the far wall. The wolf was bounding toward her before she could even regain her footing. Two somewhat contradictory concepts formed in her head at once, wordlessly, though the meanings were clear: "I'm going to die," and "Remus does all right as a werewolf--I can too." Escaping the attack never even crossed her mind, for it was impossible.

The tiled bathroom echoed with a tremendous racket, but there was no pain. Hermione opened her eyes, fully expecting to find herself as transparent as Moaning Myrtle. Fenrir Greyback suddenly struck her, knocking her down, but did not bite.

It took her a moment to realize he'd landed in two different places.

It took her a moment longer to realize his head had bounced to the other side of the room.

Myrtle let out a blood curdling scream and disappeared down the drainpipe in the center of the floor as though someone had turned on a vacuum cleaner. Naturally, that was the moment Moody and Shacklebolt turned up.

"I'm all right," she tried to say. "That wasn't me screaming." They paid her no attention, both of them shouting and brandishing their wands importantly, trying to assess the situation.

All three spun at the creaking of one of the stall doors. Dobby stared at them in turn, brandishing a glowing blue sword. "Getted him!" the elf said, grinning fiercely.

Tonks, who had her chainsaw in full swing, whirled around and fell over when it failed to strike its target. She uttered a yelp of surprise, expecting, just as Hermione had, for her current way of life to come to an abrupt end. Finding herself still alive a heartbeat later, she scrambled to her feet. A woman lay sprawled on her belly in the mud before her.

The witch raised her head, a dumbfounded expression on her filthy face. "He..." she began, then shook her head in confusion. "He's gone?"

Tonks regarded the other nearby wizards, all of whom appeared equally at a loss. The witch on the ground began to laugh, squealing and shrieking with delight. "He's gone! He's gone!" Similar cries began to ring out around the grounds.

"Merlin's beard," Tonks proclaimed. "The old legend--to free the pack, kill the alpha wolf." She set down her saw. "Remus."

A huge black shape crashed through the trees and flung itself upon her. There was more than one pack roaming the grounds that night. Though her companions recovered immediately and threw Stunning spells with all their might, it was too late. The wolf flipped over backwards, but not before Tonks' scream warped into a howl. Only seconds later, the last sliver of moon disappeared below the horizon.

Grawp stretched his legs, then rose from his seat on the roof of his brother's cabin. Brushing Fang aside with one massive hand, he squeezed his upper body through the front door. "Hagger?" he said, patting the lumpy mass on the bed, making the frame creak ominously.

"Gitcher own breakfas" moaned Hagrid. "Oi, what is it?" he said a moment later, lifting his head from the pillow.

"Doin' okay?" asked Grawp, eyeing him in concern.

Hagrid let his head fall back. He'd taken a solid beating from a giant three times his size, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so bruised. "Fine," he said, most unconvincingly.

"Moon gone," Grawp pointed out softly. "Woofs is peoples now. Sun comin' soon."

"Day... right. Nnnngh." He struggled upright.

"You stay sleepin'," Grawp said firmly. "I take care of today."

"No, no, I'm good," insisted Hagrid, rising from the bed. "Should'a kep' movin' all night, I should--then I wouldn't be so stiff." He staggered to the nearest chair. He would have knocked it over if it hadn't smashed into the table.

"Bed, Hagger," said Grawp more firmly. "Or I take to castle."

Hagrid shot his baby brother a dirty look with the eye that was not swollen shut. "I'll have none o' tha' talk from *you*."

Grawp shrugged, knocking over a sack of flour. "Dey say Inferies comin' now woofs is done," he said. "Not good if dey touch hurts. Lotsa germs on Inferies."

Hagrid snorted. "There's no such thing as germs, Grawpy. Yer bein' silly, now get outta my kitchen--"

"Is too germs," the Giant interrupted indignantly. "Hermie said so! You be in bed, Hagger. You not okay to take on Inferies." Grawp nudged his brother toward the bed with a hand like a moving wall.

Sensing that resistance was both futile and painful, Hagrid allowed himself to be propelled into bed with only a token reluctant groan. Grawp picked up the worn quilt between two fingers like tree trunks and tucked Hagrid in, but when he started to extract himself from the front door, Hagrid halted him. "Hang on, Grawpy. I got sumpin' fer yeh..."

Molly Weasley had collapsed twenty minutes earlier. Most of the Daughters were in tears, wondering aloud how the Lady could forsake them. Sirius already had a terse chat with Dumbledore's portrait regarding that question, and the old man hadn't a guess, either. He'd told Sirius to take the Pensieve, of all things, up to the tower and place it in the Circle, but it hadn't made a difference. They seemed to be on their own with the three Horcruxes.

Dumbledore's portrait admitted that he'd destroyed the signet ring with Dark magic, which had been nearly too powerful for him to control and cost him his hand. Both Sirius and Draco could at least comprehend the necessary spell, but neither had ever cast anything like it--and neither were eager to do it once, let alone three times. In the graying light of dawn, however, they stared at one another, unspoken words weighing heavily between them.

Sirius jumped up from the couch, rapping Draco smartly on the shoulder. "Room of Requirement," he said quietly. "Take that." He pointed to the Pensieve. Turning to the nearest witch, he instructed her tersely but kindly to take the Sisters down to the infirmary. "No one's to stay up in the tower, hear? In fact, tell Arthur to keep everyone below the fifth floor."

Sirius checked the boys' dormitories himself to make sure no one remained in the tower. He swore profusely when the staircase to the girls' dormitory converted to a slide the instant he set foot on it, but a feisty old crone from Gwynedd assured him she'd clear out any stragglers. He waited (across the common room) until she reappeared and gave him a thumbs-up before he departed through the portrait hole.

Draco was holding the door open to the Room of Requirement. Sirius tried to identify the setting inside, but couldn't. "Some part of the Manor?" he asked.

Draco shook his head. "The Little Hangleton estate," he said, shuddering. "Darkest place I could think of."

That made sense. "Good show," said Sirius approvingly. "Really sets the mood." He regarded Draco with a piercing look. "Are you ready to die?" he asked, as gently as possible for such a question.

Draco's eyes welled up, but he held his head high. "I'm ready to end this."

With a nod and a quick squeeze of each others' forearms, the two wizards entered the room. The door slammed behind them, immediately vanishing into the wall.

"But you'll be--"

Lucius Malfoy cut off his wife's words by clamping his hand over her mouth. "Don't argue, Cissy. Find the first person you recognize and surrender. No strangers! And especially no Centaurs! Go!"

She stood her ground, however, and gazed at him so imploringly that he relented for another precious moment. "I'm not giving up," he whispered. "I've found a... weakness. I don't know what, exactly, but it's a solid bargaining chip. I have a *plan*, Narcissa. You must trust me." He pulled her close. "Go. Stay out of sight. Get as close to the castle as you can--the fewer who see you in custody, the better."

The woman was as stubborn as he was, which he both loved and found incredibly irksome. "But Draco! I won't risk him--"

He clamped his hand on her mouth again. "He doesn't have Draco. Draco escaped." He snarled in frustration at the widening of his wife's eyes; there was just no time to explain it all. "I've seen the proof. Now GO!"

Narcissa Malfoy had lived on the razor's edge a long time, but she trusted her husband. He'd taken terrible risks, revealing the Master's diary and deliberately letting that cursed Prophecy escape. The consequences for their family had been horrible, but they had also kept the Master's power limited. That pretentious little brat Potter might actually have a chance at finishing him! More importantly, if anyone could discover a way to unseat the Dark Lord through sheer cunning, it was Lucius. She clasped her husband tightly one last time and darted into the trees.

It was no coincidence that she and Lucius were ordered to enter the grounds through the Forbidden Forest. Lucius could hold his own with his brigade of vile Inferi, but she was *meant* to be hurt or killed. She stooped over as she ran, not daring to pause long enough even to Disillusion herself. She had to get far ahead of the Dark Army, lest all her potential captors be too busy dueling to arrest her. She hoped she was also quick enough to stay ahead of any creatures of the Forest that might pick up her trail.

She couldn't stop herself from screaming when she was tackled from behind.

Despite her terror, Narcissa didn't drop her wand. When her assailant grabbed her legs and tried to flip her over, she assisted the process, knowing she might only get one shot. His wand was immediately jabbed to her forehead, though, and she knew she had only one hope. She let her wand fall from her fingers. "Surrender!" she gasped.

"Narcissa?" It was still too dark in the Forest for a good look at her captor, but she recognized the voice.

"Lupin. *Mr.* Lupin," she amended. "Mother of Merlin, thank you. Please. I surrender. Please."

Lupin stared as though she'd spoken in Chinese. She peered at him more closely. "You look terrible," she squeaked.

He blinked a few times. "Oh, I'm fine," he said casually, as if they were exchanging pleasantries outside a cafe on Diagon Alley. He shook his head as if clearing it, sitting back on her legs. "Don't distract me. You're surrendering?"

*Wonderful. He's gone barmy. Probably got hit in the head.* "Yes, Mr. Lupin. That's right. I surrender. I don't want to fight. Please."

Lupin's gaze hardened. "Convenient timing," he snarled, pressing his wand more firmly against her forehead. "You've become rather polite in the past two minutes, too, I noticed."

Narcissa had endured too much for too long to die at the hands of an overzealous, loopy werewolf. "Remus John Lupin, if you intend to marry my niece, you might give a thought to keeping peace in the family. Will you accept my surrender or not?"

Again he shook his head to loosen the cobwebs. "Accept your... Of course, Narcissa. Of course. You'll have to pardon... I'm a bit distracted. Only it seems I'm no longer a werewolf, and I..." He took a deep breath through his nose. "The air smells wonderful this morning, don't you think?"

"A bit earthy down here," she drawled with forced patience.

When Hermione realized who Viktor was Levitating through the oak front doors, she dropped the box of bandages she'd just Conjured. "Tonks! No!" Her sleeve had been torn off and the bite on her shoulder was obvious.

"No talking," the wizard murmured to his patient, but she ignored him.

"Wotcher, Herms," Tonks said weakly.

Hermione took her uninjured hand. "Greyback's dead! You won't--"

"Yes I will," replied Tonks with a little squeeze. "Different pack got me. S'okay. Reem an' I'll do a little switcheroo." Her head lolled to the side.

Viktor tossed his head meaningfully toward the marble stairs. "Go. Go!" urged Hermione, taking over the burden of Tonks and sending him charging out of the castle.

Elias Ravenclaw put his hand on the Frenchman's forearm. "It's guid. *Ami*," he said, pointing at Grawp. "One o wirs." He waved until the Giant peered down through the tree limbs and smiled in recognition. "Hou's the brither, Graowp?" said the Scot, when he was close enough to address without shouting.

"Hagger beat up dis mornin'. I put him to bed."

Elias frowned, not comprehending. "Canna be naither eechie nor ochie, na? Be he in baid or oot o it?"

Grawp cocked his head to either side, resembling an animal puzzled by a strange noise. "What dat mean?"

Elias gaped at him a moment. "Nae ken. Is Hagrid abaid, is he no?"

Grawp turned to the other wizard. "What dat mean?"

"Ah deu not undairstan' eizzair zee one of yeu," said the Frenchman. Both Elias and Grawp stared at him.

"Och, tha's a fash. Ah canna be liftin a wurd ye say."

"Huh?" said Grawp.

A putrid smell wafted amongst them, restoring some level of communication. The wizards eyed each other in alarm: Inferi! They spun into the wind, wands at the ready, but were both quite surprised to hear the Giant chuckle. "Dis gonna be great," said Grawp, then there was a loud metallic snap. Both of them instinctively hit the ground at the subsequent thunderous pounding on the ground, which was just as well. They were barely cleared by an enormous animal, which sailed over them with more heads than bodies.

"Sic 'em, Fluffy!" shouted Grawp joyfully.

Sirius put all three Horcruxes into the stone basin. "It's the only real working Pensieve there is; who knows? Maybe it's magical enough to do them all at once." Draco shrugged nervously, watching the little Dark Mark weave itself above the Pensieve. Anything that might protect or help them was worth a try.

It took them two hours to prepare the potion, despite the Room's obliging support of their efforts, bringing them supplies and devices from the dungeons. Draco had no wand, of course, but he found a right brilliant copy of their sixth-year Potions text in a cabinet of cauldrons, knives, and scales. Helpful suggestions written in its margins cut their preparation time in half, but they were still lagging behind their agreed-upon time to destroy the Horcruxes. "Only hope Harry's running a bit late, too," Sirius kept muttering.

"Stir it clockwise twenty-seven turns, then pour it over them," Draco instructed the older wizard. He tore the incantation out of a Dark text from the Restricted Section and held it up for Sirius to read, counting down with his fingers until the proper moment. The paper turned icy in his hand as Sirius intoned the spell. *Even if I survive, the Lady's magic won't touch me again after this business*, Draco thought miserably. He smirked. Remorse and regret were forbidden in Gryffindor Tower, but they would only add to the ambiance here.

At the last word of the chant, the potion turned pitch black and gave off a puff of acrid smoke. "Perfect," Sirius said when he stopped coughing. "Ready?"

"Do it," said Draco. Too frightened to squeak, his voice had dropped into a low monotone.

Together they hoisted the heavy iron cauldron and tipped it over the Pensieve. The potion was thick and syrupy and seemed to deliberately take its time spilling over the rim, the first dollop stretching insolently from a long liquid rope. As soon as it passed the rim of the basin, before it even hit the Horcruxes, the room went blindingly white.

Lucius Malfoy wiped the sweat from his forehead. This was a bloody disaster! The Order was supposed to be significantly weakened at this point in the battle. There had been Giants *and* werewolves to "soften them up." The Inferi were supposed to march in and, in their usual indifferent fashion, impede the Order's retaliations by acting as "human" shields while the Death Eaters ransacked the castle for Potter.

Malfoy's "troops" were ready. Leaf-mold on the forest floor was good nourishment for Inferi, and they'd had a nice, long slog through it. The first wave had entered the grounds by the Quidditch pitch. They were to form a moving wall, prying through whatever resistance was left outside the castle and clearing a path to the oak front doors. But when Lucius finally came out of the trees, there was no path, no wall. There was, however, a horrible smell, and up ahead, a pack of enormous dogs gnawing on what must have been the vanguard.

"Take Potter alive and whole enough to speak," the Dark Lord had said. "Summon me when he's appropriately restrained. I don't care if the rest of the castle is secure. And, Lucius," he added, "there will be no looting until I grant it. Make sure no one forgets this."

"No looting," Malfoy sneered under his breath. Not much chance of that! They'd be lucky to get in the castle at all. It had to be done, though. Whatever the Master wanted with that gold cup, Lucius was determined he wouldn't get it--at least not before some serious negotiating.

One of the dogs raised his head, some vaguely biological detritus poking from his huge snout. It looked odd, however, and for a moment Lucius wondered if the beast was missing its front paw. The second dog also looked up, and a global picture began to form. Lucius took a few steps back into the forest.

"You coward, where do--" Dolohov's words were cut off as he looked up and spotted the creature, now on its feet. "Oh."

"You were saying, Anton?" said Lucius, backing further amongst the trees. They wouldn't stop the three-headed dog, but they might slow him down a bit.

Malfoy needn't have worried. Fluffy bounded down the hill only until he struck the first row of Inferi. He took up the nearest three into his mouths and promptly shook them to pieces, wagging his tail and capering like a puppy.

*The mist was familiar. Sirius looked for the Lady, but there was no sign of her. Nor of Draco, but for some reason he didn't find that alarming. Some part of him reasoned that neither he nor his cousin had enough substance in this place to see one another.*

*"Elen sila lumenn omentielvo," said a man's voice. "Perhaps two stars," he added, chuckling to himself. "Mortal Men should not walk the shores of Avallonne', you know. Nonetheless, I'm glad you are here. Come!" Sirius had no idea how to follow, even if he could tell which direction was being indicated.*

*The man laughed, a warm, cheery, welcoming sound. "Forgive an old fool, easily distracted." As he spoke, a human shape with a long white beard and an ornate staff coalesced out of the roiling fog. "I will accompany you back to Amon Gwareth, though many years have passed since I last walked in the East." Although Sirius had no sense of having arms or legs, or even free will, he found himself automatically drawn behind the mystic.*

*The fog cleared, or faded, and he saw himself and Draco poised motionless with their cauldron, its contents still dangling at the surface of the Pensieve. The old man gazed at the two wizards with admiration, perhaps even fondness. Retrieving the locket from the Pensieve, he examined it carefully and clicked his teeth. "Mischief," he*



said distractedly. He turned toward the conscious presence of Sirius, not his physical being, and held up the Horcrux.

"Objects imbued with the will of evil," he said, shaking his head. "I never thought I'd see such things again," he continued in a light tone, as though discussing the recent price of coffee. "Not nearly as potent as those of the past, but still quite nasty. The Earth herself had to destroy the first of this kind. Your enemy studied very hard to produce these." He tossed it into the Pensieve with a hint of disgust.

"Now this," he said, stooping to pick up the gold cup of Helga Hufflepuff, "this is most elegant. Very modern." He turned it over in his hands. "And possessing considerably more power, I see," he noted. "He'd obviously improved his technique when he made this one. Nonetheless..." He set the cup back into the bowl more gently than he had the locket, apparently not wishing to mar the softer metal.

Next he picked up the red book reverently, running his fingers over the cover. "Now this one... This is the reason I have come. Such insolence!" He flipped it open, skimming the pages with obvious delight. "A treasure, you know--the written history of this world. Penned by several very dear friends of mine, in fact." He stopped at an illustration of an arched gate and gazed at it for a long time. "Yes," he said. "Many memories."

Snapping the book shut, he smiled again and took up his staff. "I shall take this home with me, to heal it properly. Far too valuable to be destroyed by the malice of one man. Not to worry," he added, apparently sensing Sirius's trepidation, "the bit of soul, as you call it, will not survive, at least as it concerns your world."

But the others, thought Sirius, desperately wishing he could speak. To his great surprise, he heard Draco's voice: "Won't you also take these?"

The old man smiled fondly. "A child of Thranduil, no doubt. I see his light in your eyes. No, child, I no longer meddle in the affairs of men. I came to retrieve this treasure, and no more. This magic is of your own making; it rests with you to unmake it. But fear not," he added kindly. "It can be done--thus the power to do it lies within any one of you."

As abruptly as waking from a nightmare, the mist and the old man were gone, and the two wizards snapped upright, seeing once again through their own eyes. They dropped the cauldron into the Pensieve, which was just as well, since the potion showed no signs of rushing out of its current container. They both staggered backwards, seeking their balance, then eyed one another.

"Bloody helpful tip there at the end," grumbled Draco.

Sirius made a wry face. "S'truth. Only why could he hear you and not me?"

Draco shrugged, smirking. "Age follows beauty."

Scoffing, Sirius peered at his cousin through narrow eyes. "Oi. 'Child of Thranduil,' my arse! You're a Malfoy to the bone."

Lucius Malfoy spotted a small huddle of Death Eaters in the Forest and waved them over. "We're being routed!" spat Rodolphus LeStrange. "The castle was supposed to be open by dawn! What happened to the Giants?"

Malfoy shook his head. "His Lordship didn't say. The werewolves, however... many of them were *released*. They're all prancing about the grounds sniffing flowers and cooing at butterflies this morning. Fenrir must have taken on someone larger than a child for a change."

"And the Inferi are useless, I see," sneered Augustus Rookwood. "Unless you plan to subdue that monstrosity?"

"Yeah," said Alecko Carrow. "All's you need is music. Why don't you go sing 'em to sleep, Rookwood?"

Rookwood bristled. "Here's a better idea: Let's feed it your filthy flesh and maybe it'll need to lie down and rest its tummy." Both trained their wands on the other in the blink of an eye.

Rolling his eyes, Malfoy stepped between them. "By Merlin, save it for the enemy, won't you? The Dark Lord--"

"What about him?" screeched Carrow over Malfoy. "Where's he? Sent us out after Potter with numbskulls for an army--why'n't he be by our side? He could shut up that dog with a blink!"

All eyes were carefully trained on the ground after the traitorous remark. "Don't act like you han't thought it yourself," she growled. "Your brother layin' dead beside mine, back there," she said to LeStrange, who clenched his jaw. "An' none's seen Cissy in hours," she jeered at Malfoy.

"And just what do you propose we do about it?" Malfoy demanded, his wand suddenly poised below her nose. "Shall we find a Floo and demand that he join us? Explain that we, his finest captains, have failed to take the castle as ordered?"

"We didn't fail nothing!" said Gunther Goyle. "If Rosier had marshalled his Giants properly--"

"Don't you dare blame Rosier!" burst Carrow. "They were outnumbered! If *your* soldiers hadn't fallen for cheap parlor magic, crawling around in the dirt hunting pennies--"

Lucius backed away, a clear show of disgust on his face for anyone who might be watching. Inwardly, he was smiling. Let them bicker amongst themselves. The Master thought to give him the hardest task: breaching the castle itself and tracking down Potter. But instead it had given him an ironclad alibi: that the earlier forces had failed to weaken the defenses. *If only you'd deployed me sooner, my Lord,* he rehearsed in his mind, *I would have found the strength to reach the castle. I would have proved my worth and loyalty. But I do bear you this gift...*

There weren't many secret passages into the Slytherin dungeons, but Lucius knew where they were. Careful to remain downwind of the giant hound, he Disillusioned himself and made his way to the cliffs above the lake.

"Just eat, Ronald," said Luna, ever calm despite the cast on her wand arm. "There'll be plenty of fight left after breakfast. Your tummy's rumbling." Ron, still bleeding from a gash on his scalp dutifully picked up the spoon and shoveled in porridge as fast as he could. Truth be told, he was starving, but none of his brothers had come in for breakfast, and eating seemed, well, wimpy.

Luna saw the guilty look in his eye as she awkwardly buttered herself a roll. "Don't be fooled. Fred hauls out a bag of scones every time he brings in someone wounded. And Bill keeps grabbing carrots and celery, although all he seems to do is sniff them."

Presently Charlie walked into the Great Hall, hauling Bill and Remus Lupin by the arms. "I could eat dragon chow!" he announced, yanking over a plate of ham and gobbling slice after slice. "Ron, quit playing the hero and get someone to *consutum* your head. And help me mind these two, will you? Apparently losing your lycanthropy turns your brain to mush."

"That's not fair!" said Lupin. But he immediately lost his train of thought and began twiddling Luna's hair.

"They're just in withdrawal," chided Hermione, joining the group. "They've lost a lot of pent-up aggression. It'll take a few days to be back to normal." She tossed a book down on the table to emphasize her point: a very dusty, small tome titled *Unmakyng of Werebeests*. "Did you know vampires were classified as were-bats until this century? In other words, wizards infected with chiroptery. But now the Ministry considers them magical beasts!" Her eyes blazed.

"One war at a time, Hermione," said Ron.

She screwed up her face impatiently, but apparently saw the wisdom in that statement and munched, brows furrowed, on a piece of toast. "Honestly, I intend to have a long chat with your father once things--" Her voice cut off with a sharp breath.

"What?" said a chorus of voices, following her stunned gaze to the Marauder's Map, where it lay half open on the table. Using the crust of her toast as a pointer, she indicated the cause of her concern. The name "Lucius Malfoy" skittered under a fold of the map, moving quickly through the passage behind the boys' bathroom on the sixth floor.

"The Horcruxes," said Remus, suddenly coherent. He charged out of the Great Hall, followed closely by the rest of group.

Despite having lost his wolfish tendencies, Lupin outpaced everyone on the marble stairs. Ron, Hermione, and Luna were all proficient climbers, having hiked to their respective towers many times over the years, but Lupin was an entire level ahead of them by the third floor. Hermione fell even further behind, trying to maneuver the map as she climbed. "Seventh floor!" she wheezed from a landing.

Ron rounded the next twist in the stairs, only to come screeching to a halt. "We're cut off!" he bellowed down the staircase, lest any more take the corner at full speed. "Stairs have swiveled," he panted. "We need another way, Hermione!"

Lupin ran on, not caring that he'd lost the others. As he neared the seventh floor, there was no sign of Malfoy or, indeed, any other living being. He shouted out to the Fat Lady from the top of the marble stairs. "Sirius! Where?"

She peeked out from her hiding place behind her frame. "The Come and Go room!" she yelled. Lupin barreled down the proper corridor without slowing.

He stopped short before the last turn to the Room, knowing that Malfoy was most likely stuck outside the entrance and would undoubtedly Stun him if he plowed on into the corridor. Jamming his back against the wall, he poked just his nose around the corner, shouting, "Lucius!"

Malfoy was there, all right. A bolt of red light shot past his face, so close it singed his mustache. He could hear the other wizard scrambling about the corridor, undoubtedly taking cover. He risked a peek around the corner, but Lucius was in peak form. Lupin barely dodged the spell.

"Stand down, Lucius!" he shouted, the side of his face pressed against the cool stone. "You'll never get in."

"I think not," Malfoy said breathlessly. Lupin reckoned he'd probably climbed all the way from the dungeons.

"I captured your wife," Lupin called, trying a new tack. He sensed the other wizard recoiling, but Malfoy recovered immediately and resumed whatever incantation he was muttering. "She surrendered," he added, trying to think of his next ploy. He heard something that remarkably resembled a sigh of relief.

Lupin risked another peek down the corridor, and was promptly struck by an *Expelliarmus*. *Well, at least it wasn't an 'AK'*, he thought with relief, waving his stinging hand while his wand skittered over the flagstones. "You can't hope to get out of here with them," he shouted. "The whole castle knows you're here. We're warded against Portkeys."

"Lupin, if you'd be so kind, would you either shut up, or duel with me like a man? This conversation is tiresome!"

Lupin shook his head, smirking. "Always the gentleman," he muttered. A new thought struck him. "He won't help you, you know. He's renounced the Dark."

"Do go on," Malfoy snarled sarcastically.

"It's true. His Dark Mark was burned from his throat. He won't--"

"Draco?" gasped Malfoy. Lupin's eyes widened in comprehension. Malfoy didn't know his son was behind that wall.

"That's right. Draco's in there, with Sirius Black. They're destroying the Horcruxes. When your master gets wind of *that* betrayal, the Malfoy name will be a death warrant."

"Horcruxes?" Malfoy squeaked, his cockiness evaporating.

"Horcruxes," Lupin affirmed. "All of them. They'll all be destroyed as of today. We're making him mortal again, Lucius." He could almost hear the gears whirling in the Death Eater's mind.

"I knew the objects in the photograph were valuable, but I..." Malfoy said, barely loud enough for Lupin to hear. He paused, then resumed speaking in very measured tones. "I'm ordered to bind Potter, then summon his Lordship. If what you say is true, then if Potter's binds were to slip..."

"Harry's not here. Harry's in Tunguska." Lupin bit his tongue as soon as he said it. Malfoy may have hinted at treachery, but it could easily be a trap. All this Slytherin gamesmanship was an affront to his blunt Gryffindor sensibilities. "It might end today, Lucius," he said simply, hopefully. "Your son *will* be part of the blow. Think, man. Think."

Malfoy was already speaking under his breath. Lupin strained to hear what he was saying. "... my son, I need to see my son, I need to see my son." He bolted around the corner and charged at full tilt toward the door, jamming his wand into the crack to keep it from closing. His wand cracked, but held together long enough for him to get a fingertip between the door and its post. One fierce pry, and he was in the Room of Requirement.

The room was barely lit with a purple gloom that made everything white glow like ghosts. Malfoy was already behind his son, who knelt before... was that the Pensieve? No time for mysteries, though; Sirius was also on his knees, an arc of magic like violet lightning spanning from his wand to the gold cup. His teeth were clenched, also glowing, as though his very skeleton was embattled with the Horcrux.

Remus dashed to his aid, though he had no idea what spell this was or how to augment it. He slammed into his friends' back, willing his magic to pass from his body to Sirius's. Nothing happened, not that he expected anything, really. Dark magic was entirely outside his repertoire.

But not Malfoy's. Draco's eyes were glowing violet, but the minute his father's hand gripped his forehead, they were restored almost to normal. Malfoy pointed his own wand in parallel with his son's and uttered a spell in a language unknown to Lupin, a harsh, glottal tongue.

The locket of Salazar Slytherin melted into a puddle of slag, releasing a puff of sickly green steam that faded and disappeared.

The Malfoys slumped into a loose, blond heap on the floor. Sirius seemed locked in time and space with the golden cup (*and where was the red book?* some quiet part of Lupin's mind wondered), but stalemate was not an option. Lupin glared angrily at his wand, the center bent at a useless angle, then at Malfoy's. He stretched out his arm for it, but soon gave up the attempt. He couldn't hope to duplicate the spell Malfoy cast, and a failed attempt might make things worse. *Wake up! Wake up!* he urged in vain.

The lacquer of the wand that was once James Potter's began to crackle and tiny wisps of smoke escaped from it. Lupin recalled Dumbledore's blackened, withered hand and suddenly had a very vivid image of what lay in store for Sirius. He scanned the Malfoys desperately, but they showed no sign of consciousness.

*Light defeats darkness. Love defeats hate.* All fine in theory, but the situation called for a heaping dose of both, and not in an abstract sense. Lupin gripped his oldest friend more tightly, placing his hand over Sirius's heart. He had an inspiration.

"For Regulus," he murmured beside Sirius's ear.

## 44: Fool Me Once

Chapter 45 of 50

Ondossi's motives are revealed at last.

He felt as if he was being crushed under a terrible weight, every bone smashed to the marrow, every muscle ripped from its moorings. His lungs had collapsed in his flattened chest. His heart was unable to expand; every beat was a sickening lurch. Between the pain and the lack of air, Harry nearly passed out before Ondossi raised her wand to lift the curse.

"Mother of Merlin, I hate using that spell," she said emphatically. "But you need to understand I'm dead serious, Harry. I'm sorry." She picked up his wand as he lay gasping for air, then sat down a few feet away, watching him.

Harry pulled himself on his elbows, panting, his eyes wide. "What is this?"

"Please don't move, Harry. Just stay there. Don't make this any harder than it already is."

That clearly wasn't an option. "I'm not--" He stopped short as she pointed her wand at him and glared, shaking her head reprovingly.

"Oh yes you are, that and more, Harry. I'm sorry."

"What are you *doing*?" he demanded in a low voice.

She set her jaw. "You know me and my secrets. I've had to keep things from you, Harry, because I'm aware of details that you aren't. Things that no one else knows. This just isn't going to work. It can't. So I've changed the plans. It's got to be this way."

*She's gone spare*, he thought, looking critically at the distance between them, trying to decide if he was close enough to jump her before she could cast a spell. *Not with her wand held at the ready. I've got to keep her talking.* "What changes? What have you *done*?" Even though his voice was raw with adrenaline, he kept his body motionless, unthreatening, hoping she would drop her guard.

"Harry." She took a deep breath and sighed. "I don't want to upset you more."

"Don't you dare patronize me. Tell it!"

She clenched her fists around the handles of both wands and huffed noisily. "How many times have we had this conversation?" Without further ado, however, she added "*Imperio*!"

Harry felt her will descend on him gently and thoroughly, as though a parachute had drifted silently down upon his mind. *Beloved. Don't you trust me, your Tura? Do as I ask and everything will be fine. Every day will be like that day when we rode your broom over the Quidditch pitch, pure and bright and loving, and it will never end. Just do as I say, sweet one. Get up on your knees and sit quietly.*

Of course. Harry obeyed instantly, pushing himself up into a crawling position, then folding his legs beneath him. How could he possibly do anything else, when his Tura wished it?

How indeed. Her spell was backed with the might of her magic, but Harry was no slouch either. He let his body follow the command, settling down into position, but behind a screen of Occlumency, he fought to clear his head of the complacency of the curse--fought, and won. His first thought was that he couldn't believe his luck. In all the time they'd known each other, she had never learned that he could resist the Imperius curse!

Though she was watching him carefully, she dropped her shoulders and brought her feet together, softening her aggressive stance. He concentrated on Occlumency, walling off his resistance along with every memory even remotely related to this curse. Hoping that she wouldn't notice, he shifted slightly to one side to keep his legs from falling asleep. Apparently it satisfied her, because she too sat down facing him, although still a good six feet away.

"Damn it, Harry, now you've made me take away your dignity!" she said, with a strain of sincere sorrow in her voice. "Listen: you may move around to make yourself comfortable, but you will come no closer." She started to set down both wands, then eyed him uncertainly and clutched them both tightly in her lap. Nonetheless, this was a good sign: she no longer had her wand pointed at him.

"I have to turn you over to my father, Harry." She sighed, averting her eyes, too ashamed or regretful to face him. Harry was just glad she'd looked away, for he had been unable to hold back a furious glare, and he had not been "given permission" to express his emotions. He forced his expression back to neutrality. No matter what she said, he must keep his cool. When she raised her eyes again, she looked genuinely sad.

"Prophecies stink. You know why? Because 99% of the time, no one believes them. That's human nature for you. If it's unpleasant, hey, just pretend it's just not true. Denial. Number One Defense against the Dark Arts, right there. Look at your own Ministry for the last 10 years!" She was getting a bit worked up; her voice was louder and angrier with every sentence.

"But then there's that other 1% of prophecies, the ones people accept. A collection of words that some Seer throws together, based on a 'message' from Who Knows Where. You give a quoted prophecy to a group of so-called experts, and every one of them will have a different take. If it says, 'The Chosen One will wear blue,' then they'll argue endlessly whether that's light blue or dark blue. And do Seers ever use language that precise? Puh-leeze! They'd say 'the color of the sea,' or some such claptrap, meaning everything from turquoise to gray, to whitecapped!"

Tura looked down at the wands in her hand, turning them with nervous fingers. "The Dark Lord heard a fraction of a prophecy eighteen years ago, and he set right out to make sure it couldn't come true. It's unbelievable, really, for someone who's so meticulous about *everything* to leap into action on the basis of some half-heard, half-baked prophecy. Serves him right that it nearly killed him. If one of his captains did something that stupid, he'd torture their families to death and *then* kill them.

"But he attacked you, and he left a 'mark' that fit right into the Prophecy. Of course, the Prophecy was phrased vaguely enough to accomodate anything from a freckle to a missing limb. Regardless, by popular vote, you became The Chosen One. We all believed it. But just because something wins the vote doesn't make it true. That's the

problem here.

"Harry, you have to understand. About two months ago, I paid a visit to Sybil Trelawney in her little tower. I opened up her mind and saw that Prophecy, the real, pure knowledge, not just the words she muddled together to describe it. Dumbledore blew it, Harry. My father blew it. Even though you've been groomed to be the hero since the Dark Lord left you that scar, it's not up to you. You can't kill him. The one with 'the power the Dark Lord knows not,' the one fated to kill my father or be killed, is Neville Longbottom."

It was all Harry could do to keep his face slack; he broke out in a cold sweat from head to toe. Dumbledore had once told him that Voldemort's actions had swept him into his role in the Prophecy--yet Dumbledore had also admitted he wasn't absolutely certain that Harry was truly the one ordained for that role.

"Everyone was so excited about The Boy Who Lived," continued Tura bitterly. "No one even noticed Neville. His losses were just as terrible, if not worse, than yours, you know. At least until this year... But regardless, look at him, Harry! The product of two distinguished and powerful Wizard families--precisely the kind of 'pureblood' my father longs to be. But Neville's as unlike the Dark Lord as you could ever find: humble, selfless, honest. They're matter and anti-matter, Harry. They'll annihilate one another should they ever meet.

"But when will that ever happen? Neville's been bumped clean out of the picture--by *you*. He can't even get close to Lord Voldemort while you live--everyone's too busy shoving you to the front of the line. And there's nothing I can do about it! Think about it, Harry: What do you suppose would happen if I started clamoring that the handsome, talented Harry Potter wasn't actually The Chosen One, but instead it was the awkward, clumsy Neville Longbottom? Heh," she threw her head back, "you think the old split between the Ministry and the Order was bad? Imagine if everyone had to choose between Harry and Neville. Talk about a rift! The Dark Army would march through us like a sneeze through a cheap Kleenex."

She pulled her knees up into a huddle, peering over them with a frustrated expression. Her grip on the wands had loosened.

"As prophets go, I prefer Tiresias to Cassandra, Harry. So I kept my mouth shut. People believe in you, and that in itself has power. You've been their standard, their rallying point, and that's made so many good things happen, Harry. You'll always be a hero for that. And you've been a decoy. Everyone's obsessed about you all this time, so Neville's had a chance to just grow up into his own magic." Her voice became gritty and tears filled her eyes. She looked away to compose herself. Harry reappraised the distance between them, carefully shifting his weight to keep his legs from stiffening.

When Tura regarded him again, her jaw was set. "But that's all over," she said firmly. "If you run headlong to his outpost tomorrow, he'll destroy you, and that would be that. Nothing could stop it. He's already killed you, Harry, we just haven't caught up to it time-wise. But it doesn't have to be wasted, Harry. That's the part I can still change--what your death will *mean*.

"He's going to take Europe, Harry. That's all he wants, really. He considers the rest of the world a bunch of savage Mudbloods and Muggles. Once he has Europe, he'll feel... appeased. He'll want to spend his time settling into his new realm, reading ancient, hidden books, ransacking fine treasures, all that 'conqueror' stuff. He's not going to trudge around in uncivilized filth, exterminating vermin. He's been waiting a long time to enjoy the spoils and that's exactly what he's gonna do.

"He won't just let the rest of the world go free, of course, but he'll appoint governors to handle the tedious business--people he *trusts*." She laughed ruefully. "Needless to say, there aren't many of those. Obviously up till now, I've never even been in the running! He can't see into my mind the way he does with his sycophants, and he's terribly afraid of the unknown.

"So that's why I'm going to earn his trust, Harry. Tonight. I'm going to serve you up to him, all trussed out and ready for slaughter. I'll be the Prodigal Daughter returning home with a beautiful gift, begging his pardon for the errors of my youth. I'll sit at his feet and smile winsomely while he tortures you. I'll give Bellatrix Lestrange dirty, jealous looks. And *just* when he starts to think it's all a bit much, I'll coyly ask him if I can have one of his territories. He'll be so proud. Daddy's little girl has tried her first scam; it was transparent and amateur, but the family colors are finally showing.

"He'll give me North America and he won't interfere--much--because he'll be busy overseeing his other governors while they raise their secret armies and assassins and what not. I'm the princess, after all. The others have to *unseat* him if they want real power, but I get power automatically just for being his daughter. He won't waste his energy peering over my shoulder when he has to keep tabs on people like Lucius Malfoy.

"I can save the giants, Harry! And Northpole! And my Inupiat people! I can save some of your friends, at least the ones who aren't in the Order! The Dark Lord won't spare any of them, but he might not bother hunting down someone barely connected, like Ginny or Seamus. And most importantly, I can save Neville!"

She set the wands on the ground beside her and began to wring her hands. A new rush of adrenaline brought every muscle to the ready and Harry closed his mind as completely as he could. She fixed his gaze with an imploring expression, then glanced briefly toward the mouth of the cave and the last of the twilight. He didn't make his move, however. She was still too guarded. He would only get one shot at overpowering her; he had to make it work.

"I shouldn't have told you, Harry, but now that you know... you have to take it with you to the grave. I can't let you slip any of this to the Dark Lord. He's got to believe that I betrayed the real Chosen One. Once you're gone, he'll think he's truly invincible. He'll get careless and cocky, and in the meantime, I'll be working on Neville, getting him ready for the *real* final battle. He *can't* find out about Neville! If I think he's gonna break you, I'll kill you myself, but at that point, you'll probably welcome it."

Her voice dropped still lower. "I'm going to bind you up now, and take to the keep. Sit very still, Harry." She looked down to find the wands she'd set aside.

Harry launched himself at her like a bolt from a crossbow, ramming her with his shoulder and knocking her flat, sweeping up both wands as he skidded past her. It had taken all his self-control to sit there passively, waiting for this chance. He was on his feet in an instant, his wand pointed at her throat, but between adrenaline and rage, he couldn't even think of a curse; he wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. He stood there, panting, his face a rictus of fury, as she stared up at him with her empty black eyes. He finally spoke, his voice an octave too low and raspy through clenched teeth.

"You were my teacher. My *friend*... I *loved* you!" Harry stood over her, shaking with anger. "I'm going to find the keep myself, now." he said, his voice drenched with rage. "My only question is, do I bring you along or leave you here?"

Though shaking, she glared determinedly at the ground and shook her head. Harry waited a moment until he'd calmed down enough to rein in his temper, then gripped her jaw with one hand and forced her face toward his. "You tell me, Tura. Should I take you to him? Or bind you in here to starve to death?"

"So you can go die for nothing at all?" she rasped defiantly.

Harry was not going to play games, not now. He held her gaze for a moment, trying to force open her mind, but he was too angry to focus properly. Shoving her back to the ground, he stood up straight, nodding as he steeled himself; she had shown him how serious she was, now it was his turn. He pointed the wand right between her eyes and said in a deliberate whisper, "*Crucio*."

Even fueled as he was by rage, Harry was unprepared for what happened next. There was a vibrato sound of air being forced from her lungs, followed immediately by a strange, dull grinding. She was literally imploding before his eyes, as though she were being crushed by something enormously heavy. Her nose and cheekbones shattered with sickening popping sounds, as her ribs bowed inward until they snapped. The first ones produced a dull popping, but the sound quickly became sharper. Though her nightshirt concealed it from view, he knew that the jagged edges had burst through the skin.

Horried, Harry leapt backward, flinging his wand arm sideways to break the curse. What followed was almost more sickening, for her body immediately reconstructed itself with a series of wet, meaty crunches. Only after all fell silent again did Harry realize he had backed all the way across the cave and was clutching the earthy walls with bloodless fingers.

She coughed, letting her head fall to the side to look at him. Her voice began as a strangled whisper. "Nicely done," she gasped. "Had you attended Durmstrang, Potter,

instead of Hogwarts, you would know that there are only two ways to amplify the Cruciatus curse. One is to use your victim's own wand against them. The insult of forcing your magic through their wand somehow makes the pain even more severe." She pointed weakly at his arm, and Harry glanced down to discover her pale birch wand in his right hand. "This actually happens fairly often; if you're the type that uses the Cruciatus curse, you generally have no qualms about stunning your victim and taking their wand.

"The other way is to cast the curse with a wand that has been recently used against you for the same purpose," she continued, now achieving a matter-of-fact tone that made his skin crawl; she sounded like she was calmly explaining something to her class, not informing her torturer of his unexpected proficiency. "The wand forms a link to you when you receive the curse, so when you subsequently cast your own curse back through that wand, it delivers all the intensity of your magic *plus* the original curse it sent to you.

"Needless to say, it's very rare that a victim gets a chance to wrest the wand away from their torturer and use it against them. You were lucky to break it off in time for the curse to reverse itself. Or, rather, *I* was lucky. Or not," she added with a defeated expression. Tura pushed herself carefully up on her elbows, tentatively testing her strength, then fell back to the cave floor.

"Enough," Harry said determinedly, hurling her wand away through the mouth of the cave. "I'm not your student anymore, you're not... I don't know what you are. But the game's up. We're going to find Voldemort."

She pushed up onto her elbows. "And then what, hotshot?" she spat. "You'll find him, you'll die, and he'll mount both of our heads on sticks to wave at all your friends. No more hope, no more resistance, and no one knows about Neville Longbottom. I won't help you. I told you, it's my way or the highway."

Rage began to rekindle in Harry, and he felt around his robe for the other wand, his own, which he had mistaken for Tura's and shoved absently into a pocket. "No, Tura. You're wrong. Maybe Neville *is* the Chosen One, but so what? *Who* chose him? Huh? Maybe that's something else to hate about prophecies--that people like you don't question their accuracy. How can some 'Inner Eye' be so certain about the future? Ever think of that?" He paused, but she merely glared at him. "I may not have been ordained, but I'm *prepared*, Tura. I've been preparing for it all my life. I'm going to destroy him and end this war. Now get up. We're going."

"Hah! Oh, you're *going*, all right," she sneered, "but I'm not following you to my father."

"You will. Or you'll rot in this cave, Tura, I swear it. Get up! Don't make things harder than they already are," he said, a menacing echo of her earlier words. She smashed her lips together like a toddler refusing a spoonful of healthy green vegetables.

Harry set his jaw, pointed his wand (with one last quick, nervous glance to make sure he was, in fact, holding *this* wand), and repeated, "*Crucio*."

This time Tura's limbs curled and twisted like a snail doused in salt, but Harry was relieved to see that there was no physical destruction this time. Harry simply stared at her, feeling completely numb; there was no visible injury, no bolt of light, nothing. Was she only pretending to suffer? He began to wonder if he had done it wrong. He leaned a bit closer. There were beads of sweat on her forehead, and she was a little pale, but those signs could have been left over from the earlier Cruciatus. Furrowing his brow hard, Harry nudged her shoulder with the tip of his wand.

His arm exploded into flame from the marrow outward.

He flung himself backwards to find that his arm was perfectly normal, he had dropped his wand again, and Tura was coughing and laughing at the same time.

"Yes, you nitwit, you were doing it right," she finally panted. "You know, I did the same thing the first time I cast the Cruciatus. I think everyone does. Hard to believe, isn't it? It's so sanitized! No blood. No nasty sounds. No remorse. And you could do it all day without needing a break. Of course, that's why it's Unforgivable, can't have people just using that kind of power any old time can we? That's the law." She paused, staring at him pointedly. "Tell me, Harry, when this is all over, will you confess that you've used that curse--twice? Will you present yourself to the Wizengamot for punishment?"

Harry didn't know what to say. This was different--the fate of the world was at stake! He had to get to Voldemort, they were at war, she was now a threat. *Oh, is this another one of those famous Harry Potter Special Circumstances?* Harry blocked his mind again; Tura had burned the thought into him the second he dropped his guard.

He wasn't able to hide the panic he felt at her words. The Ministry, the *Daily Prophet*, they would have a heyday if they knew he used the Cruciatus on a wandless witch. "Sure, he defeated Voldemort," they would say, "but only to take his place! He uses Unforgivable curses as he sees fit--he's no better than a Death Eater!" He imagined the look of shock on Hermione's face. She got so angry about the rights of house elves, what would she say to him if she knew he'd tortured Ondossi, especially after he'd tossed her wand outside? If she knew he'd stood over her and watched as her bones snapped?

Tura looked up at him, nodding meaningfully. "You've always been above the rules, haven't you? What are you going to do now? You might be able to silence me with the Imperius curse... but of course, if you fail, that's another strike against you, isn't it?"

"You'd face the same charges as me!"

"Of course--the old 'two wrongs make a right' defense." She snorted. "Maybe we'll share adjacent cells."

This was insane. Harry couldn't think straight. First she tried to hand him to Voldemort, and now she was talking about handing him to the Ministry! But she'd said that Voldemort was going to kill him... How could she turn him in at some future date if she was so certain he'd be dead as of tomorrow? It didn't add up. In a blow like lightning, he realized she was lying to him.

But what was the lie? Was it her story about Neville and the Prophecy? But if the Prophecy were true all along, why would she surrender him to Voldemort when he was on the verge of fulfilling it? If she wanted him dead, she could have arranged it many times over in the previous months. Why go through all the motions of teaching and preparing him? He wished he could just sit down for a minute and work it all through, there had to be some way to make sense of it, to figure out what to do next.

"What're you going to do, Harry?" she said coldly. "Kill me?"

That hadn't crossed his mind, but for a moment it sounded like a viable option. But it didn't add up either--why would she even suggest such a thing? Was this some sort of trap? Maybe he'd been right in the first place: she'd gone stark raving mad. Either way, he was going to know; the stakes were too high for games or secrets now.

"Tura, this is it. I know you're lying to me. You're not afraid of the Cruciatus, that's obvious. But you're going to open your mind, or I swear, I'll hurt you in ways magic can't repair! Now what's going on?"

The insolence drained from her face, replaced, oddly, with confusion, but she said nothing. "I'm not going to warn you again," he continued. "I know you're playing me, Tura, but I can't figure out how. You *will* tell me." Still she did not respond.

Harry steeled himself, pointed his wand, and said, "I warned you, Tura. *Sectumsempra!*"

Once again, he was unprepared for what followed the curse. He was ready to see her slashed open by an invisible sword, for blood, for screaming, but not for this. She clutched her nightshirt, but there was no blood. Instead, a thick, black cloud seemed to billow out of the center of her chest. No, not a cloud--it was too dark, too formless; it was more like the light was being sucked out of the air. She was gaping with terror unlike he'd ever seen, trying to cup this darkness without substance with her hands and scoop it back into her body. It slipped fluidly through her fingers.

"You've let him out!" she wailed.

"Let who out? Of what?"

"No time," she said in a choked voice. "Kill me."

Harry was too stunned to move. The fluid darkness started to swirl, making long tendrils that had escaped wind lazily about the center.

"Kill me, Harry. Now. Do it! No time!"

Pinpoints of red light flashed in the depths of her eyes. Her face contorted with pain and she squeezed them shut; when she opened them again, the red was gone, but she began shaking violently.

In another bolt of inspiration, Harry saw what tied it all together. She was the last Horcrux.

She had woven a clumsy lie, to persuade him to kill her, along with the soul of Voldemort she carried. She *wanted* him to feel betrayed, so he could kill her in self defense, without guilt. She'd had to improvise when he didn't strike at the first opportunity, and that got her in trouble; she was a lousy liar. The *Sectum* curse had obviously shattered the magical barricade around the Horcrux, so there was no more time for lies. Harry raised himself to his full height. "No." he softly. "No."

Too many people had been sacrificed to Voldemort. Martyrs or heroes, it didn't matter. Too many had fallen, too many would not walk the earth when this horrible war finally ended. Harry had enough. He would not be the instrument of another murder for Voldemort's sake.

He threw down his wand and strode purposefully to her, even though she shook her head frantically. He could feel the air drop rapidly in temperature as he drew closer. The center of the dark whirlpool formed a pit as the tendrils spun more rapidly through her clenched hands. Harry could see that her fingers were blue, covered in tiny crystals of ice that sparkled in the torchlight.

"It's a Horcrux? In your mind?" Harry demanded. She nodded, teeth clenched. Harry dropped to his knees, took hold of her collar, and ripped her nightshirt from top to bottom. Where her torso should have been, there was nothing but a swirling black vortex.

Harry reached in a fury toward the center, thinking to rip out whatever lay at its core, but it was too cold. His hand froze, solid and white, all the way to his wrist, though only the fingertips had passed the surface of the whirlpool. His hand snapped back involuntarily. He regarded it in a sort of curious disbelief. He couldn't feel anything, it was as though the hand had died, yet he instinctively knew that it would be in agony as soon as it thawed.

Tura was shaking so hard that Harry could tell she couldn't cooperate with him, even if she wanted to. With his living hand, he reached behind her, gripping her tightly by the nape of her neck, forcing her head upward to meet his eyes. She tried to look away; he turned her head to the side and brought her eyes back into his line of sight. "Don't fight me!" he breathed, pulling her closer, trying to fix her with his gaze. "Fight *him*! With me!"

He caught her eye, and her mind broke open like an eggshell.

"*With* me..." he told her, without words. Ignoring her tiny sting of reproach, he plunged through her mind straight into the dark pit at the core.

Harry found himself in utter blackness, not cavelike, but more like outer space: a vast emptiness. He looked for Tura, her memory, her consciousness, but they were nowhere to be found. *Where are you?* he thought. *What is this place?*

"How do you like it?" said a low, measured voice. Harry spun around, but could see nothing; he wondered if he'd gone blind.

"I don't," Harry said, for lack of anything better to say.

"What a coincidence. Neither do I," purred the voice from every direction. "It was supposed to be my home, but it's turned into rather a prison." At last Harry saw a pinpoint of light from the corner of his eye; he turned toward it and watched as it separated into two tiny specks of red, which he soon realized were rushing at him at an alarming speed. He ducked, but the red specks became slitted, glowing eyes, and passed through him with a great gust of freezing wind.

Harry spun around after the eyes, which had already zoomed impossibly far away. "Just as you deserve, Riddle," he said scathingly.

The light in the eyes flared brighter. "Not a gracious little guest, are you, coming into my home and insulting me?" The eyes came at him so fast, he couldn't even see the movement; they were simply upon him, through him, and their chill penetrated him to the core.

"I wonder, little guest, if you even know where you are," said the voice, which seemed to come from right over his head, no matter where the eyes traveled. "Or more importantly, how to get out."

Harry gulped. He knew he must be inside the black vortex, but it was certainly nothing like it had appeared just now, from the outside. It had looked small and shallow, as though he could reach in with one hand and rip out whatever it was at the center. In her mind, he'd glimpsed it once, a black and bottomless pit. She must have let him fall into it somehow... but what was it, exactly?

"Indeed. That very question has been bothering me for years," said the other. "I was rather hoping you might provide some illumination on the matter. Particularly regarding the exit."

The cold shot through him again; it must have come from behind. Harry had already given up on following the eyes. It didn't seem to matter, since there was no way to avoid a strike that fast.

"Sadly, I see that you are hopelessly ignorant. And not even particularly entertaining." Another strike, so sharp it took Harry's breath away. His tongue was frozen to the roof of his mouth.

The eyes whipped to a halt in front of him, examining him with malevolent curiosity. "I wonder..." it said thoughtfully. "Did she send you here as a little gift? Or did you break in? Are you here to vanquish me, perhaps?" A low, mirthless chuckle came, this time, from the direction of the eyes. "How noble!" it said mockingly. "You've come to slay the dragon. But you seem to have forgotten your weapons!"

Harry wanted to speak, to pluck out those hideous eyes, but he seemed to be frozen solid. Another pass would kill him, he was sure of it, his heart felt like it would burst from pumping the thick slurry of his blood.

But then Harry snapped to the realization that he had no heart or blood; his body was kneeling somewhere beyond the borders of this place. Only his mind had entered here. Thoughts could not be frozen. He *could* raise his hands. He did not need to raise them. He had no hands at all, just the memory of hands. This was a battle between metaphors; may the best mind win.

"*Lumos*" Harry said aloud, not because he needed words, but because it was a familiar way to accomplish what he wanted at that moment. The darkness immediately turned to light. A huge serpent stretched before him, uncoiled and unprepared to strike, having arrogantly lounged before him without a thought for its defense. The light had stunned it as well. Harry had the creature at a temporary disadvantage, if he could make use of it.

*One natural enemy of the snake is a predatory bird like a hawk.*

Or a phoenix...

Harry was no Animagus, but he remembered how it felt to become the cobra. He opened his arms wide, willing them to stretch into wings, his feet into claws. He had flown with Fawkes the night they Bonded; he knew how to use his back and chest to control his wings. He could feel it, he could be it, he was it: A glorious red bird, not quite free of gravity's constraints, but able to defy them. A carnivorous bird, with an appetite for snakes...

Beating his wings, Harry became airborne and seized the snake with his talons. He snapped it hard in the air, trying to break its back. But it, too, had a will to live, and coiled quickly into a writhing knot. Having been a snake once, Harry had grabbed it near the head so it couldn't twist back and bite him. But he also knew it would soon use its long, pliable body to wrap him up and crush him.

Harry flew upward. A hawk would kill a snake by carrying it to a great height and dropping it, letting it smash on the ground. But this was the snake's home, not the world as he knew it. The ground simply followed them up as he climbed. Harry was strong, but he could only flap for so long before needing to soar and refresh his muscles. But as soon as he stopped climbing, the ground would catch up with them--and that snake could easily toss him over once it could gain purchase on the ground. Suddenly the whole bird thing seemed like a bad idea.

*But I'm not a bird. I'm a phoenix.*

Harry looked down at the snake, recalling the many times Fawkes had tried him by fire. He burst into flames.

The last free splinter of Voldemort's soul writhed wildly in his grasp, then died.

Harry was in his own body with no transition. Tura lay beneath him on the dirt floor of the cavern. His frozen hand burned with pain--the flesh had already started to thaw and the nerves were howling at the injury. Nonetheless, he propped himself up on it and looked down at Tura. She was ghostly pale and cold.

"Tura! Wake up!" He patted her face with his warm hand, hoping desperately that she was still alive. "Breathe!"

To his relief, she began to stir, moving her head away from the patting. Then, without warning, her hands flew to her chest and she gasped in terror and screamed. "I lost him! He's gone!"

"It's okay!" shouted Harry, taking her by the shoulders. "He's not lost. He's dead." She looked up at him in recognition, but he was stunned to realize that her eyes were no longer hollow and black. They glowed with a warm amber light, and as she focused on him, her pupils constricted into small circles in the center of flecked brown irises.

Harry started to smile, but his joy was short-lived. Tura abruptly started screeching and flailing her fists at him like a crazed windmill. Fortunately she had almost no leverage since he was holding down her shoulders, but she was still managing to pummel him pretty soundly. Harry had a mental image of a net full of live fish flopping after being dumped on a deck. He didn't dare let go, so instead he flopped on top of her with all his weight and tried to pin her arms down.

"IDIOT!" she screeched into his ear. "FOOL! Reckless idiot! Why didn't you kill me? *You should've killed me!*"

For the first time, Harry wished that someone else had come along on this journey, just so he could share a look of pure incredulity and confirm that this witch was totally out of her gourd. "I'm beginning to wonder myself, I have to say! Stop that!" he shouted. "Stop hitting me!"

The flailing ceased, but now she dug into his sides with a furious grip. "You idiot! What if the Horcrux had gotten away? It would go right to him, he'd be all that much stronger, *and* he'd know exactly where you were! He'd know everything I know! He'd know everything *you* know." Her new pupils widened in horror.

"Well it didn't, okay?" he snapped crossly. "It's dead. So stop trying to shred me, already."

"Not until you PROMISE never, ever to do that again! Ever!"

"Okay, okay! I promise! Next time, I'll kill you straight up! You're a goner, okay?"

"Okay!" she barked, and unclenched her hands, then her eyes narrowed quizzically "Wait." She paused and wrinkled her brow. "You are SUCH a jerk."

"Me?" said Harry in mock indignation. "I destroy the Horcrux, spare your life, and *I'm* a jerk? How's that bloody possible?"

"Tell me about it! I can't figure it out myself!" she said, both laughing and crying, and buried her face deep between his shoulder and neck. She was still holding him very tightly, but not in a punishing manner at all. Harry closed his eyes and took in her softness, her warmth. She felt nice. He presently realized that Tura's nightdress was still ripped open, but the black vortex had been replaced by all the sorts of things one would typically expect to find on a pretty young witch.

"Harry," she whispered sadly, "I meant to make you a murderer tonight."

He pushed up onto his elbows, just high enough to look in her eyes but leaving barely a finger's breadth between their faces. "I know," he said. "But you don't have to, Tura. You never had to make me a killer." He paused for a beat, then whispered, "Make me a lover instead."

Harry lay beside her, blissfully spent, watching the last of the torch guttering out. Morning was still a few hours away. He listened to Tura's slow, even breath. For a few quiet moments, the world was at peace, unsullied. He drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

## 45: Pro Patria Mori

*Chapter 46 of 50*

Harry battles his nemesis at last.

"Harry. Wake up, hon. Harry."

With one firm tug, he replaced Tura's head onto his shoulder. She harrumphed, but settled back down for a few more seconds. "Lazy," she noted. "Time to get moving."

Harry stretched, yawning enormously. "In a hurry?"

She smirked and kissed his collarbone. "Come on. We can't just snuggle all day--gotta save the world, remember?" Tura sat up but Harry quickly rolled against her back and wrapped his arms tightly about her waist before she could stand. She made a frustrated sigh that fooled no one and began playing with his hair. "You slug," she

sneered.

He chuckled. "Mm-hmm. And you're a poor, helpless captive of the giant slug, forced against your will to loaf all day." That earned him a rather hard slap on the side of his rump, followed by an unconvincing struggle which ended with both of them cocooned once more in the covers. A bird settled outside the entrance to the cave and regaled them with a long, rambling song.

"I'm so scared, Harry," Tura whispered.

He continued quietly nuzzling the top of her head. "I guess I can't really believe it. My whole life has led up to this day, yet the birds are out there singing just like always. And you're here," he added. "How can this possibly be the worst day of my life?"

A cool teardrop landed on his chest, then another, but she made no sound or other sign of crying. There was nothing he could say to comfort her, and somehow he knew there was no need to try. He just held on to her, marveling once again at how pale his own hand looked against her brown skin.

After a while, the tears stopped sprinkling onto him, then she spoke. "No matter what happens, I'll be with you to the end." She pushed up on her elbow to gaze into his eyes. "No matter *what*. Hear me?"

He smiled. "Then I can't be afraid."

Leaving behind what little camping gear they'd carried, Harry and Tura crept cautiously through the forest. The surroundings began to look familiar to Harry; he noticed a particular gnarled tree that Draco had observed when he'd passed this way. They were very close to the encampment, and eyed each other apprehensively as they paused beneath the cover of evergreen branches. Where were the Dementors supposedly guarding the place?

"Not even the chill of them," muttered Tura, frowning.

"You don't suppose he's moved since Bellatrix was captured?"

She frowned. "Anything's possible. Though it's hard to imagine a better spot to defend! Better to make a stand *here* than run."

The trees came abruptly to an end at a marsh of tall grasses and shallow, stagnant water. A year earlier, as Draco had stared at a cloud of insects, Snape had chanted an incantation to raise a dry path through the muck, but such luxury could not be afforded for this passage. Tura groaned. "Man, I'd give anything to snake out for this part. We're about to become bug chow, Harry."

"Hooray," he grumbled.

"And watch your step," she added before setting off into the teeming water. "This is where he keeps his Inferi, though they don't seem to be around either."

A rush of memories: the black lake in the cave beside the sea, the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic after Voldemort's assault, Draco recoiling from the edge of the bridge after glimpsing a face in the water. Harry tried to yank Tura back to *terra* firmer, but she had already waded out of reach. "They'll be under the water!" he hissed.

"Ya think?" Tura hissed back, waving frantically at the flies already swarming hungrily about her face. "It's only a few inches deep, you goofbutt. If something *does* reach up and pull you under, all you gotta do is roll over." She gave him a final smirk and trudged on through the grasses. What else could he do? Harry glowered one last time at the water with pure loathing, then plodded in after her.

The water itself never grew much deeper than his ankles, it was true, but the muck beneath it went considerably further down. They made slow progress slogging through the marsh, sinking knee deep in mud with every step. "Oh, sure, it's all slick and slippery when you put your foot IN," Harry observed sullenly, "but pull up and it hangs on for dear life. I feel like a nail walking through magnets."

"Nice image," panted Tura, whose shorter legs routinely disappeared to mid-thigh. She halted with a squelchy sound, and tiny bubbles pipped on the surface of the sludge. "Have I mentioned how much I hate seaweed?" She pulled a stringy mass of algae from around her knee and tossed it with an unskilled flail, eager to get it off her hand. "Yeurgh."

"The sea's hundreds of miles from here," Harry noted brightly, earning The Hairy Eyeball.

After an interminable walk, the reeds thinned, and Tura signalled for a halt with a wave of her hand. "There," she said as both of them took a few involuntary steps backward. Voldemort's keep stood not a hundred yards away, a scabby, colorless building in the center of the green meadow. They exchanged a glance and a thought: *Too quiet*. Harry uneasily reminded himself that *real* monsters didn't lurk in stealth as people crossed their swamps, in order to jump out and devour them only inches from safety. *Real* monsters were far too impatient for that sort of thing, and didn't truck with abstractions like irony when supper was at stake.

*Lunatics, however...* Harry lurched remarkably quickly through the silt and pressed protectively against Tura's back, wand in hand. "I'm thinking this is all the 'take him by surprise' we're going to get," he whispered.

Tura shook her head impatiently. "Oh, for Pete's sake, Harry, even Voldie isn't trite enough for some stupid *"you shall not leave the swamp"* trick. That only happens in bad Muggle movies--"

Harry cut her off in mid-pontification by squeezing her hard around the waist, then tossed a tangle of algae toward the bank. The lump disintegrated with a red flash as it crossed what passed for the "shore." He peered down his nose at the girl.

"Huh," she said, then after a pause, "I stand corrected."

Now what? Harry was once again reminded of the events one year prior, in which he and Dumbledore stood in a hidden cave at the seaside and solved riddles to get inside. Riddles. "Talking of triteness," he said aloud. To Tura's questioning gaze, he shook his head, righteously annoyed. "Okay, think about it," he continued. "If I was a dark lord and wanted to be left alone, I'd just set up the deadliest sorts of wards around everything. Step too close and *pffft*.." Harry made a slashing motion across his throat for emphasis.

"But that's not how he does it at all. He's always showing you how terribly clever he is. He doesn't just hide away his treasures, he *anticipates* that you'll find it someday. That's why he has all these little traps ready for you. He *wants you* to find his Cave of Mysteries, so you can*fail* his challenge and leave empty-handed--and go back to all your friends and tell them how *he beat you*. How you got so close, but just couldn't get past the hidden door, or the lake of Inferi."

"Or the force field in the swamp," Tura added, nodding. "You're right, Harry; he's the ultimate drama queen. If I was serious about *my* Horcrux, I'd rig things up so anyone who got within half a mile of it would go up in smoke, plain and simple. If they were good enough to get that close, they wouldn't live to tell about it."

"Exactly!" said Harry. "Same here! But if you don't let them survive to tell the tales, then how will everyone know how 'great' you are? Pathetic," he spat.

"Word," said Tura absently, peering intently at the bog's edge. "But setting aside the insights for the moment, how are we gonna get out of this godawful swamp?"

Harry flicked his wand meaningfully. "Time for magic, I'd say."



She whapped him smartly on the wrist in disagreement (conveniently killing several mosquitoes in the process). "Typical. Can we maybe *try* brains first? Hmm? I think between the two of us, we might be able to outsmart him."

Harry rolled his eyes, but grinned. "As long as we do it before these mosquitos bleed us to death."

"Working on it," Tura said, frowning thoughtfully. She waded in a little circle for a few minutes, then piped up. "I didn't really go over the end of Draco's hike. Do you remember whether he or Snape said any sort of password to get past this ward when they were here?"

Harry closed his eyes and searched Draco's memories... that is, his memories of Draco's memories. He shuddered internally; this was exactly the sort of convoluted reasoning he used to find *spooky* about Tura. "No. But the spell to raise the land bridge was pretty long; maybe that was part of the incantation."

"Maybe," she said. "But I wonder. Because wards generally have to be raised by the one who made them, not by someone who wants to get through. That's sorta the whole point." She took a hard look at the keep, then glanced at the nondescript reeds nearby. "I'm thinking that unless he wanted to constantly answer the doorbell, he'd have to leave a little entrance."

Harry recalled once again that fateful night his sixth year, as he rode a broom with Dumbledore while the old man opened his wards around Hogwarts as fast as he could say the Charms. He too, began to scan the surroundings, looking for familiar angles and landmarks. "He could have set someone else up as the doorman."

"True," Tura sighed. "But that would mean giving someone else control over who gets in. And THAT would mean *trusting* someone. I'm thinking hidden doorway, myself. A gateway--just without the actual gate."

This was a real head-scratcher, and not just because of the midges attacking his scalp. Harry finally said, "I suppose at this point, the wards are mostly symbolic anyway. It's not like he expects anyone to get this close. Leaving a little doorway makes sense--he could always shut it later, if he needed to." He began to wade purposefully toward the north; Snape and Draco had "come ashore" further behind the keep.

They reached a point that looked vaguely familiar and tried the "seaweed test" again, with another flash of red. "Don't do that anymore, if you can help it," said Tura. "If anyone notices a bunch of flashes closing in on the doorway, that whole surprise thing will go bye-bye."

"Better it than me," Harry grumbled. A blazing magical entrance through the wards was looking better and better with each mosquito bite.

They ended up ascribing a wide arc along the northern edge of the swamp and doubling back again before the sun glinted in a familiar way off an upper-floor wall of the barracks. "It's got to be right around here," Harry said, scooping up a glob of bog scum. Before he could test the wards, however, Tura simply scrambled onto the sloping bank. "What are you doing?" he hissed in fury.

"You were right," she said infuriatingly, beckoning him to follow.

"And if I wasn't?"

She pointed smugly at the ground. "Footprints, Sherlock." Sure enough, now that she mentioned it, it was quite obvious that the grass had been trampled down all along this part of the bank, and a weak trail led up the slope toward the keep.

"Almost looks like an evacuation route," she muttered, glancing around at the extent of the flattened grass. "Geez, Harry, maybe you're right--maybe he split when Bella didn't come home. I hope this hasn't all been for nothing!" They began creeping up the bank.

Laying prone just below the top of the bank, and peeking cautiously through the meadow, what remained of their bravado quickly turned to raw anxiety. They were far too close to miss any activity around the keep, yet it was still as a tomb. "Ambush?" hissed Tura.

"Feels that way," he whispered back. He set his hand on her arm. *Somebody has to blink, Tura. Might as well be us.*

"All right," she said aloud, though softly. "I'm out front." Tightening her jaw, she leapt to her feet and promptly marched toward the barracks. Harry nearly dashed after her; he'd meant to at least say some sort of proper goodbye, but as usual, she was too bloody impulsive to let him. Instead, Harry swore briefly under his breath.

"Be careful, love," he whispered plaintively a minute later.

She was halfway to the barracks, striding quickly and purposefully, an easy target from any angle. Three-quarters of the way. Harry scanned the grounds ahead of her, around her, even flipping onto his back to check the bog behind them. Nothing! *Impossible!* If this was an ambush, it was being perfectly executed; they weren't taking the bait, and instead they were using Tura to force *him* out in the open. She reached the building itself, following the trail to the eastern side. In a few seconds she would round the corner and disappear.

"Enough of this," Harry muttered, bolting after her.

There was no point in trying to be stealthy. The meadow grasses, though thick, were far too short to provide any sort of cover, even if he were to crawl. Harry raced along the matted trail, wishing he had his Invisibility Cloak. A few seconds later he realized he might as well have Disillusioned himself--whether Voldemort detected his use of magic or simply looked out a window and *saw* him was immaterial at this point.

Tura disappeared smartly around the corner, unaware that he was trying to catch up. She hadn't looked back at him once. *Of course not*, mused Harry, *she wanted to look like she'd come here alone. Undoubtedly planning on spewing the same lame story about coming back to Daddy that she used on ME last night.* Harry snorted at the very thought. *As if there's any point in stalling for time now. We're at the end of the road.*

He stopped at the edge of the barracks, listening briefly for any sounds of struggle. Peeking around the corner, he saw Tura peer suspiciously through the main door, already open. Before he could call out to her, however, she stomped inside.

This was insane. How could she POSSIBLY have opened the front door and flounced right into Voldemort's fortress? It *MUST* be a trap--there was simply no other explanation! Harry pressed his back against the stone wall and thought furiously about what to do. If he followed her, he might also be trapped, but if he stayed behind... Merlin only knew what danger she was facing. Alone.

Straightening to his full height, he pushed off the wall and sprinted all the way to the entrance, plunging through it into darkness without slowing.

After the bright sunlight, he was as good as blind inside. Harry skidded to an abrupt halt, and though he whipped his head wildly about, he could see nothing beyond the patch of light at the doorway. "*Lum--*" he began, but caught himself. Lighting his wand would make it even easier for his enemies to see him in the dark, but he didn't need light to find them. *No more stealth*, he reminded himself, and dropped the shields of Occlumency, letting his magic reach every corner of the room.

He was completely alone.

Harry swore and lit his wand after all. What was going ON? He'd prepared himself mentally for any sort of assault or attack, but not NOTHING. He began to shiver, more out of anger than fear, but it was uncomfortable nonetheless. As soon as his eyes adjusted to the weak wandlight, Harry spotted an even darker hallway on the far wall. *She must've gone there*, he reckoned, and darted after Tura without further delay.

Charging down the hall and through the first door he encountered, Harry found himself face to face with Severus Snape.

Tura and Snape were both there, staring at each other with their mouths open. For an instant he thought they must have Stunned one another, they were so still. That alone was enough to flood him with rage, but when Tura blinked and shook her head, the realization that she was unhurt and unhexed didn't calm him in the slightest. This was *SNAPE!* Dumbledore's murderer, standing right there in Voldemort's lair, protecting his precious Dark Lord.

Harry now understood why there was no defense against the Killing Curse; it was set into motion before the words were spoken. He peered into Snape's eyes, feeling the spell build between them, knowing with pure certainty that this time, it would work. Snape was a dead man. Out of habit rather than necessity, Harry raised his wand.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

A blinding flash of green light erupted from his wand, his hand, his scar; the rebound slammed him backwards into the stone wall. He heard Horace Slughorn's words as clearly as if the man were standing beside him: "Killing rips the soul apart. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature." There was nothing natural about what was happening within him now. Slughorn couldn't have described it more accurately.

It was not physically painful. There was no blood, no insult to his flesh, but Harry screamed in agony at the terrible despair. It was worse than a hundred dementors, for though they tried to pull away hope and cheer, he could defend himself with his Patronus. But now Harry himself was rending his soul and casting it away, a deliberate act of his own will. His hands were black, heavy, fumbling; he was helpless to stop the loss. An unbearable wrenching, a flash of green light, and it was done. Harry was maimed, broken, beyond repair. He was a murderer.

Blinded, limp, he slid down the damp stone wall behind him. Harry remained conscious, but barely so. His body and mind were reeling at finding themselves incomplete, and he felt the remainder of his essence spreading, thinning, filling the vacuum left by the lost portion. He realized he had stopped breathing, and willed himself to cough, to force his shattered soul to carry on the business of life.

As his senses returned, Harry became aware of a strange sound. Laughter? It seemed like laughter, then more like choking. It was an ugly sound, but not malicious--on the contrary, it sounded sincere and heartfelt. Harry found the strength to raise his head in the direction of the sound.

Snape knelt on the stone floor, cradling Tura's lifeless body in his arms, violent sobs racking his thin frame. A brilliant red mark shaped like a bolt of lightning stretched from the crown of his head to the end of his nose, where it forked and continued down both sides of his face.

Harry's head fell back to the floor. He lacked either the strength or will to move again. That couldn't be true. It was a trick, some sort of hallucination left by his departing soul as punishment for his deed. He opened his eyes. The scene had not changed. But it couldn't be real. *I'm dreaming*, he tried to shout, but only a croak escaped his lips: "I..."

Snape raised his head. "Why?" he said, misunderstanding Harry's mangled voice. "Why do I live? Why is she dead? Or, why are you not writhing under my Cruciatus curse, Potter?"

Harry would not have phrased it quite that way, but Snape had covered most of the questions budding in his mind at the moment. He nodded feebly. Snape looked down at Tura's forehead, then up again with an expression that Harry had never seen on him before, one Harry would typically call horror, but he could not fathom what it meant on Snape.

"It's because we're soldiers, Potter," he said quietly. "Pawns. Ants. We exist to carry out a plan. We do things we don't understand. But we have faith in the *plan*. We believe in the great minds that laid it out, because we know we don't grasp all the nuances, only our narrow view. We can't predict what... sacrifices--" Snape choked back a sob, "--must be made." He broke down in tears again, pulling Tura tightly to his chest.

Harry thought one of them must have gone mad, but he wasn't sure if it was Snape or himself. He realized he *must* hold himself together--he could not afford to yield to shock or grief. Not now, not yet. He needed to keep his wits about him to complete what he'd set out to do. As he'd done many times at Hogwarts, he Occluded the part of himself that wanted to scream at the sight before his eyes, and settled into a dispassionate, if temporary, calm.

He watched in disbelief as Snape rocked her, keening, as though he could somehow bring her back to life by comforting the empty shell of her body. It dawned on Harry that Voldemort would be enraged to learn that his daughter was dead, that yet another prize was now beyond his grasp, that Snape had allowed this to happen. *That must be it. Snape couldn't possibly be grieving, he's crying in fear for his own skin.* Harry struggled to move, to find his wand, perhaps Conjure some ropes. He wasn't sure exactly what had preserved Snape or what his strange new mark meant, but he didn't dare try the Killing Curse on him again.

Snape finally set the body down, gently closing her eyes and placing her hands by her sides. He staggered over to Harry and flopped roughly beside him. Harry mentally braced for the worst, still far too drained to fight. Snape wrenched Harry's hands behind his back and bound them, then seized Harry's wand from the ground and tucked it inside his robe. "Get up," he snarled. "The Dark Lord awaits you."

As he struggled to find his feet, Snape yanked him up unceremoniously by the scruff of his neck. To his surprise, Harry found that he could walk once he got his balance. He was shoved wordlessly down the dark hallway, then through an archway on the left. Green torches flickered on the walls, reminding him of the blue candles in the Department of Mysteries. This room, like the rest of the keep, was empty.

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked in a gravelly voice, which prompted him to cough rather hard. It seemed his broken soul was still having trouble remembering to breathe properly. Snape glared at him with contempt but did not answer. Reckoning that he had little to gain by being courteous, Harry pressed on. "Don't tell me Voldemort's great Dark Army is just you and him!"

Snape suddenly grabbed his bound wrists and flung him toward the center of the room. Harry had no hope of keeping his balance, but he arched his neck upward to keep from landing face-first on the cobblestone floor. It helped, though he still smacked his chin hard against the stones. Thankful that he hadn't bitten his tongue, he took a deep breath and raised his head for a look around.

He had landed at the edge of what was obviously the "hot seat," a circle of glassy stones like rose quartz in the middle of the otherwise bland floor. Ignoring the ache in his jaw, he commented, "Pink! Nice. Very girly."

"On your knees," said Snape in a low hiss, pulling him up by the hair this time and dragging him into the middle of the circle.

"Snape!" squeaked an unpleasant voice from the doorway. "The master thought you'd be playing with his toy. You're to hand him over."

Snape regarded the speaker with disbelief, then said fiercely, "He would not deny me the right to watch Potter die."

"I never said you had to leave," said Peter Pettigrew sourly as he stepped into Harry's line of sight. "But I'm guarding him. The Dark Lord wants to torture him by himself; you can stand back and watch, as you say."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "You're bluffing."

Pettigrew straightened up haughtily. "Fine! See what *he* says when he arrives."

Snape looked back and forth nervously between Harry and Pettigrew, clearly unwilling to give up his prize but unable to risk that Wormtail might be telling the truth. He finally set his jaw and leaned down to whisper in Harry's ear. "I'm not going anywhere, Potter. Remember that."

Snape stepped back and gave Wormtail a withering glare, but the little man only wrinkled his sharp nose smugly. He stepped into the circle and Conjured some black ropes, which wound of their own accord all around Harry, squeezing him far tighter than the leather straps Snape had used to bind him. Harry had been bound by Wormtail's magic before, in the graveyard after the Third Task in the Triwizard Tournament. He knew there was no use wasting his energy on the coils, but working at the straps at least gave him something else to think about.

"So, Wormtail," Harry began, but before he could finish the insult, Wormtail clamped his silver hand over Harry's mouth, forcing a metallic finger between his lips.

"Open, or I'll knock them down your throat," said Wormtail, tapping Harry's front teeth meaningfully. Harry jerked his head back in alarm, instantly wishing he'd kept quiet. The thought of having his teeth broken out here, miles from any Healer, made his skin break out in goosebumps. Very hesitatingly, Harry dropped his jaw. Pettigrew immediately thrust a metal finger as far into Harry's mouth as it would go, choking him.

"I've been told to keep you silent, boy," said Wormtail viciously, wriggling his finger to make Harry gag harder. "I can't let you drown in your own vomit, but I can certainly get close. Now breathe." He pulled his finger back and just this once, Harry did as he was told, drawing in fresh air through his nose, willing his throat to relax, settle. Having his breath stolen like that was almost worse than the Cruciatus Curse. Though not nearly as painful, it had a deadly primal terror all its own.

"Do not make a sound without the Master's permission," Wormtail said, sweeping the finger across Harry's tongue one more time to make his point. Not that there was much danger of him speaking until the spasms in his throat calmed down.

At that point, a cold white light flicked on overhead, illuminating the pink circle in which he knelt. Harry realized for the first time that the mortar between the smooth stones was brownish-red with old, dried blood. *Probably Draco Malfoy's*, he mused flatly. The light within the circle was so bright that he could no longer see the rest of the room. Harry scoffed, or would have if Wormtail's hand hadn't been over his mouth; this was exactly the sort of melodramatic entrance he expected of Voldemort.

On impulse, Harry bit down hard on Wormtail's metal finger to brace himself. Pulling up with his neck, back, and shoulders, he managed to bring his feet under his body. Wormtail was too surprised to push him down, but he did not lift his hand to follow Harry's motion, either. Harry ended up stuck in an awkward crouch, balanced against Pettigrew's hand, but at least he would not meet Voldemort on his knees. *Well, I gave it a good shot*, he thought, waiting for his feet to be kicked out from under him.

Voldemort's robes rustled as he walked about the room. He was moving slowly, perhaps wary of some trick. *Take your time, old man*, Harry projected, hoping that Voldemort would hear it even though they had not yet made eye contact.

There was a scoffing sound somewhere to the right. *Score*, Harry thought, but he kept that Occluded.

It sounded like Voldemort settled into a chair, and Harry imagined (and projected) the popping crackle of arthritic knees. This was almost better than talking out loud; his insults could include visuals and sound effects.

"What news of the front?" Voldemort inquired coldly. *Of course*, thought Harry, *I'm far too unimportant to be first thing on the agenda*.

Wormtail, his arm growing weary from bearing Harry's weight, piped up immediately. "Excellent, my lord; the Dementors are returning, and the Order is all but wiped out--"

"Severus, the truth," said Voldemort dismissively. *Can't lie to a liar*, thought Harry wryly.

Wormtail was taken aback; he had assumed the Dark Lord wanted to demoralize the prisoner. Snape spoke up right away. "We hold our own, though not without losses. The Order have been fighting relentlessly, presumably to distract you so *this one* could approach."

So *THAT* was *Plan B*. Harry's belly felt as though a lead weight had just dropped through it from top to bottom, but he steeled himself and flicked his brow as casually as he could manage. *Worked, too, didn't it?* he projected.

"There are losses on both sides, of course?"

"Of course, my lord."

"Any names that will be meaningful to the prisoner?"

Snape cleared his throat. "Yes, my lord. Bill Weasley. Charlie Weasley. Fred Weasley." Harry felt as though the blood was draining from him. "Rubeus Hagrid. Alastor Moody. Nymphadora Tonks."

"What of the girl he's so fond of?"

"Ginevra Weasley lives, though just barely. She was burned alive. Her arms were so charred, they broke off when they attempted to move her."

It took all of Harry's strength to keep his emotions clamped in.

"Encouraging," said Voldemort lazily. "However, we ought to try not to kill the ladies just yet. Men who lose their lovers fight harder, both for vengeance and because they feel they've lost everything worth living for."

Snape coughed. "Indeed," he said in a raspy voice.

"That reminds me, Severus," said Voldemort with cold curiosity, "did I just hear you weeping?"

"My lord, there has been a... tragic loss."

"Really? On the eve of victory? Do tell."

There was a long pause before Snape said shakily, "Miss Ondossi was with Potter. She is dead."

Feet slammed onto the floor. "How?"

"I don't know."

*I killed her. Under your roof.*

"Wormtail," said Voldemort, his voice deepening with menace, "you may as well let Potter speak, he is bent on screeching with his mind." Pettigrew reluctantly dropped his hand and Harry, to his great relief, could finally stand up straight. The red eyes drew closer. "You seem eager to explain what happened," said Voldemort.

Harry glared defiantly at the glowing eyes and said nothing. He braced himself for the Cruciatus curse, leaning ever so slightly toward Wormtail in the hopes of cushioning the inevitable fall.

"Potter... I am asking you about my *daughter*. Do not play games." Voldemort stated it so simply that Harry was taken aback; the absence of menace in his tone felt more threatening than ever.

Harry suddenly recalled the way Dumbledore had once criticized Sirius for his callous disregard of Kreacher. *Is it possible Voldemort honestly cared about her?* Harry realized that it didn't matter what Voldemort felt, because he didn't want to belittle Tura's death by speaking of it with disrespect. Not even to the monster that fathered her.

Harry raised himself to his full height. "I was trying to kill Snape," he said quietly. "He diverted the curse onto her somehow, probably something like my own mother did. Look at him, he's marked now, like me."

The glowing eyes turn toward Snape, but apparently it was too dark for Voldemort to confirm Harry's claim. The torches flared suddenly, filling the room with warm, yellow light. Snape touched his face tentatively with his fingertips, clearly uncertain whether to believe Harry, but when he looked up at Voldemort, he saw that it must be true.

Voldemort walked over to him, studying the mark with intense curiosity. "Interesting," was all he said.

He eyed Harry thoughtfully, then paced a few more steps. "Interesting," he repeated. Harry shook his head in disgust. *So much for the idea of breaking him with the painful news*, he thought. Voldemort's appeal for decency had been just another ploy.

"My beloved daughter," mused Voldemort, in a tone that was neither mournful nor affectionate. "She was an experiment that failed rather miserably, I'm afraid. Though she did prove useful up until now." He sneered angrily and shot a vicious look at Snape.

He finally fixed his gaze upon Harry. "I think she should join us." He pointed his wand to the stone archway and said, disdainfully, "*Accio Strumpet!*"

Harry put on quite a show of disbelief. "Strumpet?" Did you really just say 'strumpet?' You date yourself, old man."

Voldemort threw Harry a hateful glare just as Tura's corpse hurtled into the room, pointing headfirst like an arrow and stopping in front of his wand. He regarded her coldly for a few seconds, then flicked his wand upward. She dropped like a stone, twisting into a grotesque heap at his feet. Voldemort spun to face Harry.

"Yes, strumpet! I see she's filthy with your seed, Mudblood, though obviously it will never bloom--and for that I am genuinely grateful."

That went through him like a sledgehammer, but Harry refused to let the pain show. Voldemort wrinkled what was left of his forehead, obviously searching for his reaction. Harry stared at him defiantly, very nearly blurting out a biting comment about the Horcrux he'd displaced. He held his tongue, though, knowing full well that Voldemort was trying even now to decide if the Horcrux still inhabited her body. That was comforting--now Voldemort had something to sweat over. Harry raised his chin insolently.

When his gaze passed over Snape, the bravado slipped.

There was no mistaking the mixture of hatred and jealousy in Snape's expression. Harry bristled with indignant rage--how dare Snape even imagine himself with her? As though she was some sort of chattel, a prize he could own by currying her father's favor!

Voldemort gazed between them with a surprised expression, then threw his head back with laughter. "What's this? Severus! Have you been colluding with my daughter behind my back?" His laughter actually sounded genuine, and it lasted for some time. He finally glanced disdainfully at Pettigrew. "Wormtail, pay attention."

"Ah, Severus," he continued, strolling to Snape's side, his voice surprisingly congenial. "You're *sotreachous*! Tell me, did you somehow contrive to make her fall in love with you? Did you plot with her to steal her father's throne, like the miserable Muggle kings of old?" Snape didn't answer, staring straight ahead as though his eyes were boring through the opposite wall. Voldemort laughed again. "And you *kept* it from me... for how long, I wonder? Never mind, I must hear this tale in full, later, when I have time to appreciate it."

"Do you see, Wormtail--" he threw Pettigrew another withering glare, making sure he was watching, "--what sort of man rises to the top of my ranks? Exemplary service, coupled with audacious deceit. It can be so frustrating! Yet it is a necessary product of cunning. A leader must be ambitious, unafraid to take initiative." He gently stroked Snape's cheek. "But sadly, those same traits inevitably lead each and every one of them to test me." With that, Voldemort raked open the new, raw mark on Snape's face from top to bottom with clawed fingers. Snape shuddered but stood his ground.

Voldemort sighed. "And as usual, I must let it pass. I can hardly kill you for acting precisely the way you are meant to."

Now he cast his gaze on Harry. "You, on the other hand..." He returned silently to his seat. "You will die today, Potter, of that there is no question. But I've been giving this a great deal of thought."

He appraised Harry through narrow eyes. "I must adopt a unique approach with you. Our last tete-a-tete proved that my choice of wands has put me at a disadvantage. You see, I have spoken at length with a fellow named Ollivander, whom I believe you knew. He was an expert on wands and the *Priori Incantatem* effect. I have learned that this effect is both powerful and unpredictable. It would be foolish to attempt to kill you in an arena where mere chance could foil me. Particularly since you have managed to stack the deck in your favor."

Harry rolled his eyes and sniffed derisively. "Now that's funny, that you would suggest *I'm* a cheater."

"Idiot!" snapped Voldemort, with equal derision. He stared quizzically at Harry, then spoke very softly. "I never guessed you were too dim to grasp the plans that your betters designed for you." He closed his eyes and turned his head briefly, his face screwed up in disgust. "I don't pity my enemies, but I join their shame in their pathetic champion."

Every hair on his body tingled. He had no idea what Voldemort was going on about, but he knew that this was not mere goading. Harry had missed something very important, something that could give him an advantage, that *would* have given it, but instead, the advantage was all Voldemort's. For the first time since he entered the compound, Harry was genuinely afraid.

Voldemort knew it. He regarded Harry evenly, reappraising him. Harry suddenly needed to vomit, but forced himself to breathe deeply through his nose as he had earlier. His mind began to race, spurred by adrenaline into keen focus, bent on survival. *Okay, he got me there*, he told himself. *But it's all right, he'll be cocky, less cautious.* Voldemort was speaking again but Harry blocked him out, forcing himself to focus on what Voldemort had said earlier, to find that advantage he'd missed.

He had mentioned the *Priori* effect. *That was after the Triwizard Cup*, Harry thought. *We duelled, and our wands locked, and then those ghost things came out of them* A new surge of adrenaline went through him. *The ghosts came out, and fought him, and they can do it again* Harry knew he was on to something, but he didn't have it all yet. He spared one brief, longing thought for Hermione and her ironclad reasoning, but he had no time to waste wishing for her to be there.

He closed his eyes for a moment and forced himself to recall the next thing Voldemort had said. "...an arena where mere chance could foil me." He vividly remembered the bizarre golden web that had encased them during the battle in the graveyard, the beads of light that passed between their wands. *I don't know exactly how I pushed them back into his wand*, Harry thought. *Maybe it was just chance. I got lucky that time; he might this time, but so could I again.* Harry's chest began to ache, he was taking too much time, but again, he forced himself to breathe, to hold back the panic.

What did it mean, "stacking the deck?" Harry knew that was the linchpin, yet had no idea what it referred to. He had to go slower, think through the implications, line them up until they made sense. *He says I've stacked the deck*, Harry thought. *Literally, that means I've taken the good cards and set them aside. I can deal them to myself if I need a better hand. What good cards?* At that point, the analogy fell apart--the "good cards" could be anything. *No! Not anything. He was talking about the arena, the ghosts. He means that I've stacked the deck with... good ghosts. All the people he's killed since then, they'd fight on my side, all the people I've killed--*

Harry gasped.

Tura had tried so hard to incite him to kill her. She'd been furious when he spared her in the cave. Up until now, he had assumed she wanted him to kill the Horcrux within her, even though it meant that she would die too. Once she was free of the Horcrux, there was no need for her to die, yet she had hurled herself before the *Kedavra* curse. *I'll be with you to the end*, she had said. *No matter what.*

Suddenly it all made sense. Love was the only thing that could defeat the Killing Curse, not any of Snape's treachery. She'd intended all along to die by Harry's wand. She made sure that, if luck failed Harry in the final battle, if beads of light slid into his wand and forced out a smoky spectre, it would be hers. She had thrown away her life, on a 50-50 chance that he would need her helping hand when he was beyond all others' reach.

Harry looked down at her crumpled body and burst into tears.

Voldemort stopped short, regarding him in the cool, calculating way of a spider examining a fly in its web. He clearly believed the battle was already over, that Harry had broken in terror and would be begging for mercy as soon as he caught his breath. He even tossed Snape an arrogant smirk, as if to affirm that the *real* entertainment was about to begin. He swaggered back to stand before Harry, and spoke in a voice like poisoned silk.

"It hurts, dear boy, doesn't it? You can finally see it. Your friends have made you a sacrificial lamb, hoping desperately to barter a few more hours of life for their own selfish skins. Oh, how they encouraged you, professed their faith, their love... but they sent you to me on a fool's errand. They never even told you the plan, did they? Because they knew you would refuse them when you saw how flimsy it was!

"So much betrayal, discovered far too late, a lifetime of deceit... Tell me, Harry, would you renounce them if you could? Would you trade *them* for your own life, now that you understand?" The red eyes gleamed.

Harry allowed Voldemort to ramble on, registering his words automatically, but caring nothing about their meaning. Tura died to make sure he would not be alone in the final battle. His mother died to make sure he would reach it. His father and Dumbledore: They didn't fall, they laid themselves down willingly. They believed in him, they knew he would not fail them. There was no greater love than what they had given him, and Harry wept with the realization that he had been so very lucky to receive it. It was time to show his worth.

Harry shook the last tears from his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was free of rancor or bitterness, the voice of hope itself. "I do understand. I understand that in your fear of the Prophecy, you set this all in motion. You came after me because you thought you could crush me like a fly. How could a child, a baby, overpower you? It was impossible! But it happened; it happened again and again. Do you know why, Tom?"

Voldemort's eyes widened; Harry had said his name in a calm, sure voice reminiscent of Dumbledore's. "It's because I was never, ever fighting *you alone*."

Harry turned to Wormtail. He cast his meaning effortlessly into his captor's mind, not wasting time with words. *I spared your life once, Peter Pettigrew. That is a debt of mercy you will now repay.* Aloud, he said, "Release me."

Pettigrew's eyes were fixed on Voldemort, and though his face twisted in horror, his limbs moved of their own accord, dropping the ropes and flicking his wand to Vanish them as neatly as he'd Conjured them earlier. A terrified moan shriveled into a squeal as Pettigrew transformed into a rat, his silver hand dropping to the floor with a clank. The rat scurried madly away along the base of the wall, jerking and tripping over the stump of its front paw.

Harry wasn't concerned if Wormtail escaped or not. He returned his attention to Voldemort, gazing at him for a moment, his face serene. "It's over, Tom."

Voldemort took a step backward. Harry could see fear mounting behind his eyes, but no hint of surrender. Voldemort took a measured breath, glowering at Harry. "You guessed the plan, then, Potter? That when I engaged you, the golems from either of our wands would side with you against me. But as I said, I recognized that problem long ago. I've had a long time to plan a novel solution."

He slowly circled Harry, who turned on his heel carefully to face Voldemort straight on. "It wouldn't do," Voldemort said, "to duel with you in the time-honored way, wand to wand. And yet I have a reputation to maintain, Potter. I can simply destroy insignificant pests--like that one you brought to the graveyard, for example--but not you.

"You've seen my captains, how they secretly scheme against me." Voldemort glared at Snape. "I cannot let them imagine that I have any weakness. They've studied you, Potter, and many believe that you hold the key to their own ascent to power. Thus it isn't enough for you to *fall*, you see. They must know you *were defeated*. When my prophesied nemesis succumbs to me, it will extinguish any hope that they could best me themselves.

"Do you see my dilemma, Potter? Duelling is impossible, thanks to a freakish fluke of our wands. But I can't simply strip you defenseless and kill you in cold blood. I must make you an example! I must prove definitively that I can't be defeated, or I'll never know a minute's peace again. I can't duel with you, yet I *must* duel with you. There seems to be no solution... but I finally found one. Not particularly elegant, but it will serve.

"I used only my hands for my first kill, you know. It was before I'd even heard of sorcery. And you will be my last, Potter, I'll make sure of it, just for the sake of symmetry." To Harry's great surprise, Voldemort cast his wand across the room and raised his right hand in a dramatic sweep.

He brought it down hard, like a hammer to the anvil, toward Harry's throat. Though Harry could only see a blur of movement, he detected a flash of silver. There was a dagger in Voldemort's hand.

Seven years of Quidditch had honed Harry's reflexes. He was fast enough to block the thrust. He hoped to catch Voldemort's wrist, but there was no time for finesse. The blade struck the palm of Harry's left hand and plunged through it up to the hilt, passing vertically between the bones and emerging from the back covered in a thin sheen of blood. It was so sharp that Harry couldn't feel it right away, just a deep ache as though he'd caught a rock thrown at great speed.

Voldemort was stunned by the parry for less than a heartbeat, but it was enough. Closing his fingers around the hilt of the dagger, Harry ripped the knife from Voldemort's grasp. He whirled himself around, pirouetting away from Voldemort's other side, certain there would be blade in that hand as well. Countless scuffles with Dudley had also trained his reflexes--Harry knew how to avoid a second blow.

He was correct; Voldemort flicked his left arm and a dagger dropped out of that sleeve as well. However, Voldemort was no fighter, at least with non-magical weaponry. He followed Harry clumsily, swinging his arm in a wide arc without shifting his weight. Harry knew his enemy had lost his balance, that the blow no longer had any strength behind it. He permitted the knife to flail at his sleeve as he concentrated on his own footing, then slashed Voldemort's face in a backhand blow with his impaled hand.

Now Harry felt the knife. It torqued violently as it struck Voldemort. But it was well spent; the blow cut Voldemort soundly, splitting one eye, then gashing upwards across his forehead so the other eye was blinded with blood. Harry had to cry out in pain as his hand was pried apart, but he had bought plenty of time to leap clear and plan his next move.

For a moment, Harry considered ripping the knife from his palm, but he didn't have the stomach for it. Although it looked gruesome where it was, it also had an unreal quality that made it somewhat bearable. Taking hold of the hilt and pulling it out, however, was just a little too graphically realistic to accept. He glanced at Voldemort, then back at the knife, and gave up on the idea. He'd have to improvise for the moment.

Voldemort was mopping his brow frantically, backing away. He undoubtedly wanted his wand, but it was somewhere safely behind Harry. *Can I use it?* he thought, taking a few steps backward and glancing around for it. Harry's own wand was the brother of Voldemort's, but it was harder to imagine a more evil twin. For now, Harry thought, it wasn't worth the risk.

Harry jolted straight upright. He didn't need a wand! He could perform the Killing Curse without it, couldn't he? Elias Ravenclaw was proof that conventional magic could be wielded without wands, and now that he'd used the *Kedavra* on another sorcerer, he knew it stemmed from the mind, not the wand. He drew in a measured breath, and

fixed his eyes on Voldemort to form the curse.

Voldemort, gripping his brow tightly with both hands to clear the blood from his remaining eye, was already doing the same thing.

Both combatants were thrown backwards in a brilliant flash of light, as their curses collided between them, the green bolts of energy annihilating each other into yellow flame. Harry landed hard, but he found his feet quickly. Finding himself alive, he calmly noted how much easier this second murder had been compared to his first. But as the flames began to clear, Harry saw that Voldemort still lived, leaning against the opposite wall as he caught his breath.

"It appears... I was right... the first time," panted Voldemort. "Our magic is... hopelessly entwined." He pushed himself away from the wall and began to lumber slowly toward Harry. "It *will* have to be done in the Muggle way, like savages. But that suits me, Potter," he said. "We face each other evenly matched. Except that my weapon rests comfortably in my hand, while yours..." He smiled viciously.

Harry regarded his left hand again, fearfully. There was no way around it, he had to pull out the knife or he would face Voldemort weaponless. He steeled himself and reached for the handle, then screamed; the nerves in his hand seemed to have woken up at last, and the jostling from simply taking hold of the grip caused a pain so sharp that Harry nearly fainted. Voldemort was coming closer. *If I pull it now, and pass out, I may have time to wake up before he reaches me* He had to do it. He backed up quickly to the far wall, thinking that if he slid down, at least he wouldn't crack his head on the stone floor. He steeled himself, mentally preparing for the pain...

... and in the meantime, he flipped his hand over, palm downward, and the knife slid cleanly out of his hand of its own accord and fell clattering to the ground.

As the wound throbbed anew, a surprisingly fresh and calm part of his mind reckoned gravity was part of the Earth's magic. Harry snatched up the knife, holding it flat against his chest, and leapt back to his feet.

Voldemort was only a few meters away, wiping at the blood still spilling from his forehead. His teeth were bared in fury. "Don't you DARE you run now! Look at me, you filthy Mudblood coward--look what you've done! I shall pluck out your eye to replace this one you've spoiled." He curled his hand into a fist and pulled it from his face, revealing the gruesome injury.

*Vitreous humour*, projected Harry, though he knew not where he'd picked up that particular factoid.

"Indeed," spat Voldemort. "Clever boy, aren't you? But your time is up, Potter..." He went on talking, circling Harry just beyond arm's length.

Harry ignored him. There was no point in listening to his blustering. Despite all their magic, all their mental battles, it had come at last to steel versus steel. Harry's main experience with fisticuffs consisted of getting the snot beaten out of him by Dudley and his gang years ago, while Voldemort had exclusively relied on magical methods for decades. Harry could see it in the way he wove and feinted with the dagger. Like Harry, the old man had no idea what he was doing.

*And he's a big yammering braggart, wasting his breath taunting me when he ought to...*

Draco Malfoy, on his knees in this very room, quaking in terror. "Strike quickly!"

Harry thrust his arm forward and launched his body toward Voldemort with a feral scream, the tip of the dagger leading his course like a ship's prow. Harry cared nothing for the knife in his enemy's hand, only that his own knife would hit home. He kept his arm strong, his fist clamped shut, moving forward through sheer will. He smashed into Voldemort, knocking him backwards and toppling him to the floor. Harry threw his weight on top of the dagger, not knowing exactly where it had landed in the rush, but driving it in wherever it was.

His hands and chest became suddenly, unexpectedly warm as the scream in his throat finally tapered off to silence.

## 46: Neither Can Live While The Other Survives

*Chapter 47 of 50*

Harry learns that a great many things were not as they seemed.

*That was it?*

Harry wriggled away from the motionless body. It seemed impossible that Voldemort was truly dead. For seven years he'd dreaded this confrontation; how could it be over just like that, in the blink of an eye? There must be more to it than the slimy stickiness of blood on his robes and a mangled hand. Why, Fred and George's great escape from Umbridge was more auspicious than *this*.

The very end of the dagger's hilt could still be seen under Voldemort's chin. Harry stared at it curiously for some time. He never would have guessed he would hit the throat--Voldemort had always seemed to loom far over him, larger than life. *I guess I've grown*, he mused a bit lightheadedly. As if he needed more proof than all those too-small robes.

He leaned against the stone wall to regain his balance. He soon discovered that he had taken for a twinged muscle in his side turned out to be another wound. Voldemort had stabbed him just below the ribs, but it didn't seem serious. He was drenched with blood, however, and it was quite impossible to tell how much of it was his own.

"All of it," Harry mused aloud after a moment's thought. Hadn't Voldemort stolen his blood that night in the Little Hangleton graveyard? He started to laugh, realizing that there was nothing remotely funny about the situation, but that only made him laugh harder. A moment later it resolved into a scream, then another, and another, until his voice gave out.

There was a distant hum on the edge of his hearing, like the buzz of a pesky mosquito. It jarred Harry out of his shocked daze when he finally realized its significance. There were no living people within a hundred-mile radius of this place, except for himself and Snape.

Without another glance at the remains of his nemesis, Harry located his wand. He was still holding the dagger, and after staring at it a moment with a blank expression, he finally poked the tip experimentally into the leather of his boot. The blade was sharp enough to split the leather, and Harry carefully slid it to the hilt into the side of the boot. He hoped it wouldn't carve its way through to his leg. Scrambling to his feet, he staggered down the long hallway to the entrance.

Snape's voice grew louder and louder, and though Harry recognized almost immediately what his former professor was up to, it baffled him beyond measure. When he finally reached the door and looked outside, he had to steady himself against the jamb to get his bearings.

"What are you doing?" he finally managed in a throaty growl, not because he didn't know, but because he couldn't believe it was happening.

Snape was kneeling beside Tura's body, which he had laid out flat on the bare soil. He fixed Harry with a glare of pure outrage then returned his attention to the body and continued to chant in the Inupiaq language.

What could Harry do but watch in a haze of utter disbelief?

He knew it was the same chant Tura had sung over the graves of his parents in Godric's Hollow. Her language had no meaning for him, but he recognized it just the same. He'd heard it at other times, too: when, together, they killed that finch in the Forbidden Forest, and in her memory of her first seal hunt. Thanking the mother for the life of her precious child.

An insane impulse to laugh aloud clawed at Harry. Tura would go ballistic if she saw a "gussuk" like Snape chanting the sacred words of her people. The problem, of course, was that one of her people or even Harry himself ought to be performing it, but he could not. How in the name of Merlin, Mordred, and Morgana did *SNAP*e know the chant?

Harry watched and listened for over an hour, refusing to think too hard about the answer to that question.

When Snape at last fell silent, Harry snapped to as if awakening from a trance. He realized he had no idea what to do or say. The time to demand, "Get away from her!" had long passed. Sitting for so long in silence had allowed exhaustion and grief to set in, and Harry no longer burned with a righteous need for vengeance against Snape. He was weary and despondent and just wanted the day to end.

Snape sat beside the body, shoulders slumped, for some time, then without looking up, said, "I'm going to bury her now, Potter, unless you have an alternate proposal."

Here, in the middle of nowhere? Harry didn't protest, however--it made sense. This was her part of the world. If he walked long enough toward the rising sun, he would reach the Bering Strait. If he could also walk back through time, it would become an isthmus between the East and West, the one her ancestors had crossed to settle the New World. Of course she should be buried here, embraced by her living Land. Climbing shakily to his feet, Harry wordlessly joined Snape, raising his wand to dig a shallow grave.

Together they lowered in the body by hand, without magic. When it was time to replace the excavated soil, Harry found he couldn't do it. Handling her cold, stiff remains had vividly enforced the point that she was gone, but burying her was somehow too terrible. Harry stood back as Snape woodenly shoved in great scoops of dirt by hand, wishing he could turn away from the sight. Both of them wept the entire time, the dust from the disturbed earth settling into muddy streaks on their faces.

When Snape rose to his feet at last, he turned to Harry with a too-familiar glare of cold indifference, which was rendered absurd by the obvious remnants of tears. Unblinking, they faced off for some time before Snape finally sneered, "Well?"

Harry rolled his wand slowly between his hands. "Who was she, to you?" he finally asked.

Snape's lip curled in disgust, or rage, or both. He finally held out his hand, very slowly and deliberately, and nudged the tip of Harry's wand so that it was pointing at his chest. "I mean to show you, not tell you," said Snape icily. "I want you to know what you destroyed today. Take your wand and use Legilimency. Understand."

Choking back his own rage at Snape's presumptuousness, Harry ripped his wand away from the other wizard's fingertips and held it at his side. "I don't need a wand," he hissed, then peered deep into Snape's narrow black eyes.

He was standing before the desk in Albus Dumbledore's office, which looked basically the same as it always had, yet everything seemed just a bit too small. Dumbledore was sitting across from him, wearing a kind expression. "You wish to speak to me?" he said, yet it was Snape's voice that grunted the words.

"I do, Severus. I've found a task for which you are uniquely suited."

"Yes?"

"I've identified a person of interest on the North American continent," said Dumbledore cheerfully, leaning back in the great chair. "A witch of considerable power, but unknown allegiance. I would like to learn more about her intentions."

Snape nodded. "You require Veritaserum, then?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Merlin's beard, no! Nothing that heavy-handed, not until I've at least attempted diplomacy."

"What exactly do you require of me, Albus?" said Snape with more than a hint of impatience.

"Why, diplomacy! I would like you to serve as my ambassador."

*You gotta be KIDDING!* thought Harry.

"You're joking," said Snape.

Dumbledore continued to smile, but the sparkle had left his eyes. "I most certainly am not! This is a very formidable woman, one who, like yourself, is uninterested in conversations of a... trivial nature. I understand she is very difficult to engage. But you have a number of things in common with this witch, and I suspect you're uniquely capable of earning her confidence."

Snape cleared his throat with a dubious grunt. "Such as?"

Dumbledore idly took his wand and prodded the animated silver device currently occupying his desk. "Well, for one, she has an avid interest in Potionmaking."

Snape turned up his nose in disgust. "Oh, come now! If you are devising some sophomoric romantic fantasy--"

It was as though a steel door had smashed closed on the memory. Silence and darkness for a brief instant, then Snape's thoughts shifted to a new scene. He was in the Alaskan taiga, stomping through peaty mud and grass toward the Wizard city of Northport, cursing the clouds of biting flies and the fact that he was forced to Disapparate so far from the dry, clean streets. A few jumbled recollections of a tavern, a lunch counter, a quiet wizard who showed up hours late for their meeting and led Snape to a beautiful mansion, only to steer him to a battered stone hut behind it.

Snape knocked on the door. A young woman opened it, her eyes covered by a black rag bound around her head. Harry recognized Tura, but she was a stranger to Snape. "Yes?"

"I am Severus Snape." He had no idea what else to say, and realized too late that he should have at least started with "good afternoon."

"Hello, Severus Snape," she said with a curious smile.

Another mental transition, much less abrupt than the first, and Harry was back in Dumbledore's office. The device on the Headmaster's desk let out a puff of steam and fell still. Dumbledore glared at him. "I hope there's no need to answer that accusation, Severus." Snape nodded, his shoes coming quickly into view.

"Then I will continue. She was brought to my attention via American law enforcement. They claim she is a Legilimagus."

Snape looked up in alarm. "Is this true?"

"I don't know, lad. I'd like you to find out."

He eyed Dumbledore apprehensively. "I've never met one of the Legilimagi. I can't possibly best her with my mind if that's truly what she is."

"You misunderstand me," laughed Dumbledore. "I want you to *talk* to her, not try to measure her thoughts. From what I understand, she desperately needs to learn Occlumency. It seems to me that this, plus your common interests, will serve as natural seeds for conversation."

Snape continued to gaze down at the desktop, then finally regarded Dumbledore again. He finally sighed loudly and said, "I don't think I can learn anything of value by muddling my way through a chitchat about potions and Occlumency with a complete stranger." There was a note of humility in his voice that Harry had never heard before.

The warmth returned to Dumbledore's smile. "Nor would I expect you to. I mean for you to leave as soon as this term has ended and spend the summer with her. An academic exchange, if you will. She's never been schooled, and I think she'll appreciate your expertise in those subjects."

Harry felt Snape's tiny tug of intrigue. "I would enjoy a sabbatical of that nature, of course, but as for your further purpose... Albus, you *know* me." His voice was strained. "I can teach her what I know of potions and Occlumency, but you're asking me to--"

"To do precisely that! And to permit her to speak freely to you on other matters if she so decides."

"No one 'speaks freely' to me! I don't earn people's confidence, it's not part of my nature! What on Earth makes you think I can reach this woman?"

Dumbledore glanced down at the silent device on his desk, then addressed Snape carefully. "Of all the people I trust, you alone have a common acquaintance with her... in Tom Riddle. She is his daughter."

Snape trembled before her door, though she seemed half his size. The Dark Lord was apparently gone, but the girl standing before him could easily become his successor. But that was not the worst of it; he had suddenly found himself out of his element. All the opening lines he'd rehearsed were useless. He had contrived them for someone terrifying like Lord Voldemort, or at best, an arrogant brat like the students in his House. He knew precisely how to cope with such people. He was unprepared to converse with a plainspoken maiden in a humble cabin, whose expressions were unreadable behind a blindfold.

He squirmed inwardly at the silence, particularly when her brow furrowed a bit over the fabric. She finally said, "Wow, you know, I don't usually have to ask, but is there something you need from me?"

"Yes... no... not really." Could he possibly look more foolish? What had Dumbledore been thinking, employing him as a diplomat?

Her brows poked up over the glasses. "Yes *and* no! That's different!" She paused, then asked wryly, with an exaggerated accent, "Yer not from roun' here, are ya?"

"No, I'm not. Please pardon my... ill manners." That seemed safe enough.

She offered her hand to shake, and he returned the gesture absently, struggling to come up with his next comment. As soon as his hand met hers, a violent shudder pounded through him and her mouth fell open. "You know my father," she said quietly.

Snape gritted his teeth; if this was his death, then so be it. She tilted her head and though she was blindfolded, he could feel her gaze upon him. "And you don't know what to ask of me. I think you better come in."

"That's... that's impossible!" barked Snape. "The Dark Lord has no child."

Dumbledore shook his head. "That *is* the general belief, but it's certainly possible that he fathered a child. He was in Northport around the time of her conception, establishing a reputation on that continent. I believe he was still human enough to... complete the necessary acts."

Harry had never been so uncomfortable hearing about this topic in his life.

"Human enough? How long ago was this?"

"She has just turned seventeen."

"Seventeen!" Snape did some mental Arithmancy. "She was born just before I came to Hogwarts. I met the Dark Lord my first year. His body was still... mostly intact."

Snape ducked through the cabin door shaking with relief. She was hard to read, but her voice held no malice when she said "my father." He reckoned that if she shared the Dark Lord's sadistic tendencies, she would have shown it when she recognized the Dark Mark. He might yet live.

She closed the door behind him and took off the blindfold. Though Harry knew what to expect, he felt Snape's surprise when he beheld her colorless eyes the first time.

She sat on the floor and pointed to a mat; there was no furniture. "You didn't know about the eyes, did you?" she asked.

"No." Snape obediently sat on the mat.

"It's called aniridia. No iris. Light hurts my eyes. So I cover them," she sighed. "Does it bother you?"

Snape was genuinely puzzled--did she mean the eyes or the blindfold? "Bother me? Why would I be bothered?"

She propped up her knees and rested her elbows on them. "Some people are unnerved by it. They say I look cold, like a reptile."

"That's absurd. Reptiles typically have very colorful eyes." Again his heart sank, although he was less worried about being slain and more about appearing completely obtuse. She stared at him, then laughed merrily, and Snape found himself smiling.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the dimness, Snape realized that the shack was filled with plants. Dried leaves and roots hung from the ceiling in little bags, and shelves of little pots lined the south-facing window.

Harry would have liked to linger there a moment, but Snape was guiding him. Memories rolled past rapidly, allowing only the briefest impressions of specific events, but Harry could feel their overall impact. Over that summer, Snape's distrust eroded into curiosity, then respect, then fondness. He met few people who loved and understood potions and their ingredients as he did. She, too, was guarded and suspicious at first, but delighted by the presence of a "quiet mind," as well as a fellow potionist's company. Snape began looking forward to visiting her each day, and found excuses to delay his departure in the evenings. She seemed equally content whether they spent the whole day talking or working in silence together on some interesting elixir. She was most eager to learn Occlumency and proved an adept pupil. She was also completely unfazed by the way he looked or dressed, or even by his bitter cynicism. Snape found himself regretting that he had to return to Hogwarts that fall.

Her owl was snowy white, and Snape watched for it every morning from the head table in the Great Hall. He gave her some money to buy an iron stove for her shack, but it proved unsuitable for conversation. The metal remained stubbornly hot long after the Floo powder was added, and the door was too small for her to put her head through.

Snape preferred writing letters anyway. They gave him time to think about what he was saying. He bought an enormous barn owl in Diagon Alley that fall, the only owl he'd ever owned. He had to trade it in for another snowy, as it returned sheepishly in early November with frostbitten feet, his letter still tied to its leg. Tura flippantly suggested



he get a penguin, making him laugh aloud for the first time in years.

The next memories were older. They had been seen through the keener eyes of a young man hiding on the side of a house, not daring to look around the corner. Snape was listening intently to a conversation in the garden beyond, regarding his upcoming sixteenth birthday.

Father's voice was raised in anger; he was speaking to Mother's parents. "...don't care what happens, as long as we're rid of him."

"Rid of him? Really?" sneered Grandmother. "A bit late to start planning to get rid of him, don't you? How do you expect us to take him off your hands?"

"He's no Muggle, is he, so there's not much I can do! He's *your* grandson, can't you arrange a marriage for him or something?"

Both grandparents scoffed. "We could, if he had any appeal whatsoever," Grandfather spat. "Look at him! He's surly, bookish, incapable of civilized conversation. No decent family would have him, even if he weren't a half-blood!"

Grandmother burst in, "Precisely! And I, for one, am not about to mingle with the blood traitor families, scavenging around for some spinster no one else will take."

A very quiet voice--Mother's--mumbled, "Can't you just leave him alone? He'll find someone to love."

There was a short but loaded silence, then a burst of voices seemingly competing as to which could berate her the loudest. "Love? Hah! Look what love got *you*!" "Merlin's ghost, Eileen, if you can't say something intelligent, then keep still!" "As if he were capable of love, even if he stumbled into someone fool enough to love him."

Snape's stomach had churned as he heard these words, and Harry's followed suit. These were all Snape's own flesh and blood, speaking of him like some feral beast. Harry could feel the young Snape raising barriers of a different sort in his mind, walling himself off internally from these cruel judgments. He would show them. He was an island. He had no need for love. Grandmother was right--look at what love had brought to Mother: a lifetime of abuse at the hands of a stinking Muggle. A useless emotion, a waste of time and talent. He wouldn't make that mistake. He had his books, his mind, his meticulous attention to detail. He had mastered these things and they were valuable. He would show them all what great things he could do, without them, without *anyone*. Snape had no use for idiots like his mother, who threw her power away for the sake of love.

Without transition, Harry was immersed in a new memory. This time he knelt in a beam of cold light at the center of a circle of stone, shaking with fear but also grimly determined. Voldemort stepped into the circle from the darkness, sending a stab of pain reflexively through Harry's forehead even though this was only a memory (and not even his own). Snape bowed his head as Voldemort approached, and although he knew what to expect, he still jumped as the Dark Lord placed one long, white finger under his chin, lifting his head to gaze into his eyes.

"I accept your worthy service, Severus Snape. You are bound to me until your death." Snape extended his left hand, cupping it as though he expected to receive a coin or a key. His hand was trembling. Voldemort leaned down slowly, and Harry envisioned him spitting into Snape's palm and then shaking hands. But to his horror, Voldemort's eyes suddenly glowed bright red, his still-human face distorted into that of a snake, and he bit Snape deeply on the wrist.

Harry couldn't tell if he had screamed, or if it had been Snape in the original incident, but the next seconds were blind with pain. When Snape's vision cleared, Harry didn't want to look, but had little choice. Snape was triumphantly admiring the Dark Mark etched into his forearm by Voldemort's "kiss." He was now more powerful than any of *them*, and he had been chosen solely on the basis of his merit. The Dark Lord appreciated knowledge and skill, and did not waste time indulging in the idiocy of politics or family connections. Severus Snape had, at last, found a place he belonged.

Snape was freezing to death, within sight of the garish Christmas lights of Northport, cursing their Disapparation radius even harder than he had the previous summer. He heard the baying of wolves and was paralyzed with fear; the sound took him back to his student days at Hogwarts, into the tunnel from the Whomping Willow to the Shrieking Shack.

But they weren't wolves at all, only a team of "fish burners" bounding through the snow to meet him, pulling a sled with Tura standing on the back. Tura wanted to take him on an old-fashioned tour of the city, but gave that up after one look at his completely inadequate "winter clothes." They had dashed to the Fly By Night and warmed up before a huge fire in a private parlor. Snape wanted desperately to kiss her, but he was utterly uncertain if that would be welcome. Though he fretted for hours trying to decide, Harry saw a familiar gleam in her eyes that left him no doubt of her opinion on the matter. Soon after that, Snape slammed down another barrier in his mind.

His memories sped up again: bitter cold and roaring fires, the perpetual night above the Arctic Circle broken by the stunningly beautiful aurora borealis, his cynicism and isolation fading in the glow of her uncluttered acceptance. Once again, he felt the thrill of belonging, and not for what he could offer, but for what he *was*.

Snape yearned to be free of the Dark Lord, but his Mark was made to be permanent. Tura eventually took him to her *afatkuq*, the Muggle shaman most adept at her people's intimate magic with the Earth. The shaman explained to Snape that the Mother Earth understood all things, good and evil: they all sprouted from her. She could take the noxious Mark back into herself and dissipate it through rocks, lava, even oceans. It was a great evil, but she was vast and strong.

Snape was afraid to try. Tura held him that night, and suddenly burst out laughing. She reckoned there was little he could do to enrage Voldemort more so than winning his daughter's heart. Snape felt the fear drain away with his own laughter.

With the shaman, they traveled to one of the American islands, to a place with the melodic name of Pu'uhonua o Honaunau. To Snape's surprise, this was in the tropics, and the icy tundra was replaced by fields of pumice and colorful birds. They were visiting a refuge nearly as old as Hogwarts, where warriors of any army could rest when they grew weary of battle. Built on ancient sacred land, the magic in the air was nearly palpable, despite the throngs of Muggle tourists wandering through in outrageous printed shirts.

They stood before a huge boulder, his Marked hand wrapped in leaves, the shaman and Tura singing incantations. The ancient Muggle took Snape's hand and thrust it into the boulder as though plunging it into a bucket of water. Pain, terrible pain. Tura stood behind him, propping him up, stroking his hair and whispering, "Hang on, Severus. Just a little longer." The boulder began to shake, threatening to wrench his arm from the socket and shatter the bones, but he concentrated on the rhythm of her hands in his hair and refused to flinch. The boulder crumbled with a loud report...

...and time slowed to a halt as he withdrew his arm. The Dark Mark was gone.

The visions cleared from Harry's mind, bringing him back to the grassy soil of the keep. Snape sat before him with his forearm exposed. Half of his Dark Mark was gone, wiped from his arm like so much dirt. With a firm swipe of his palm, he smeared the rest of it into a mere shadow. Harry stared at it, glancing up at Snape but somewhat afraid to catch his eye again lest he be submerged into another intense memory.

"Do you understand what she did, Potter?" whispered Snape. "She didn't just erase my Mark. She released me from all of it, the hatred, the fear... the prison I'd created inside my mind, my heart. She broke down all the walls I'd built... she brought me *to LIFE*! I loved her! And you *murdered her*."

Snape raised his fist as if to strike him, but stopped himself with a shudder of self control. "You were *so eager* to kill, weren't you? But as always, too arrogant to learn the proper way to do it, too bent on carrying out your whims to control your power. You *missed* me, Potter, and she paid for your little tantrum with her life!"

"You know that's not true," Harry said, with the calm certitude that comes from the knowledge that one is unimpeachably correct. "I felt the curse connect with you. If you can set aside your determination to prove what a failure I am, you'll remember it."

Gaping, Snape stared wide-eyed at him for some time before quietly admitting, "I remember."

"I don't know how she saved you," Harry continued. "She took it into herself, just like my mother did for me. But she'd planned it all along. Weren't you listening to

Voldemort? She reckoned there would be another *Priori Incantatem* effect in the final battle, and she was determined to be there if I needed her."

Snape dropped to his knees and slammed his fist to the ground over and over.

Harry watched in silence until the fit passed. "So you were her angel all along," he finally said, more to convince himself than anything else. It still seemed impossible, despite all the evidence. This was *Snape*, the man who had made his life miserable for six years at Hogwarts; the traitor who murdered Dumbledore in cold blood. "Tell me: How were you able to fool her about your ultimate loyalty?" he demanded coldly.

Snape was on his hands and knees, hanging his head in misery and exhaustion, but it snapped up to meet Harry's gaze with unmistakable wrath. "Morgan le Fay, Potter, can you truly be so thick?" he spat. "You tell me: Is there an Occlumens alive that can block her? Use your head for more than a hat rack, for a change--"

Harry had folded his arms impassively as Snape delivered his retort, but when his former professor suddenly fell silent and wide-eyed, a bolt of adrenaline shot through him. Even though his wand was in his hand, it took an instant to untangle his arms--and that was too much. Something struck the back of his calf, though whether it was a curse or another meteorite like the one that leveled the Tunguska forest, Harry couldn't say. He dropped immediately to the ground, his leg in such tremendous pain that sparks danced in his vision.

He was dying. He knew it. He felt just like he had when the cobra had bitten him--the same sense of poison spreading further throughout his body with each pulse of blood. This venom was much more potent than Tura's, more painful, more noxious. Strangely, however, his thoughts were quite calm and rational. He wondered how Snape had managed to orchestrate this attack, and idly speculated on whether he would live long enough to regain his eyesight and cast a final curse at the traitor.

As the pain mounted, he realized he'd better get on with it if he had any hope of avenging himself. Harry squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to clear his vision, but when he finally managed it, he found that the venom had spread to his arms already, paralyzing them. As he reflected on this final bitter irony, a single crimson feather spiraled slowly downward before him.

Fawkes had broken free.

There was a terrible screech as Fawkes and Nagini sized up the situation and steeled themselves to attack. Harry's sight was fading as though in a rapidly dimming room, and even Fawkes's brilliant feather right before his eyes appeared dull and gray. Nagini taunted the phoenix in Parseltongue.

"Dumbledore wasn't even cold in his grave when you Bonded to this one," she spat. "But who could blame you? Young, powerful, beautiful... a worthy companion."

The snake had raised half her body from the ground in a weaving coil, ready to strike in any direction. Fawkes hovered just inches beyond her apparent reach, scanning intently for an opportunity to strike.

"You *could* save him, if you stop this foolish posturing and tend to him!" Harry could no longer see, and the snake's voice was growing weak and distant. "He's fading, you know--he has but a handful of breaths left in this world. Will you just let him die? There's nothing worse than death, Fawkes. You of all beings understand this!"

*Nothing worse than death.* Even in Parseltongue, Harry recognized the words. He'd heard them phrased just that way once before, as Voldemort and Dumbledore faced one another in the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic. *She's another Horcrux*, Harry thought in despair. *We all counted wrong.*

When he felt the fluttering rush of air, his heart sank. *Fawkes, NO!* he projected with as much strength as he could muster. *Voldemort. Don't let him escape!* But either Fawkes couldn't hear him, or ignored him. There was a new, sharp sensation in his calf as Fawkes ripped open the silk robe with his bill, then a wave of cooling relief as the first tears landed on the bite wound. Harry couldn't help but feel thankful when the pain diminished, but he pushed Fawkes away with his foot as soon as he regained enough strength in his limbs. "Snake. Voldemort. Kill it!" he gasped.

Fawkes glared at him reprovingly, but recognized that Harry was out of danger and took to the air. Still burning from the venom, Harry made a monumental effort and raised himself up on his elbows to watch Fawkes's progress. He saw that Snape lay on the ground not far away, clutching his arm against his chest. He, too, had been bitten by Nagini.

A flare of golden light behind him sent a wave of horror through Harry; he thought Fawkes must have been bitten and forced to burn up. But seconds later there was another unearthly screech and the rustle of wings. Harry flipped himself onto his back in an attempt to see the battle. Fawkes was indeed glowing with golden flames, stretching his talons toward the coiling, lunging snake. "Hang on, Fawkes, hang on!" groaned Harry as he willed the feeling to return to his fingertips so he could pick up his wand.

But Fawkes saw his opportunity and struck. It happened so quickly that Harry couldn't tell what had transpired, but the next thing he knew, Fawkes was climbing rapidly straight up in the air with the snake writhing beneath him like the tail of a kite. He'd caught her by the back of her head, the only point he could hold without risk of being bitten.

Harry could only watch in horror as Fawkes climbed in jerks and starts as the snake torqued and twisted its body. Fawkes, he knew, could carry a heavy load of *willing* passengers, but an uncooperative magical beast was another story. At one point, the phoenix simply hovered in place, though he beat his wings with all his might.

When Harry could feel his fingertips clutching the soil, he immediately grabbed his wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" he cried once, twice, a third time. The last spell seemed to strike either Fawkes or the snake, as they both began to climb again at last.

Harry rolled onto his back and continued to point his wand and repeat the charm, until Fawkes and the serpent were merely a speck in the vast sky. *What's he doing?* Harry finally wondered, realizing that he had no idea what Fawkes planned to do with his deadly passenger. How high could the phoenix go before suffocating? Nagini required a lot of oxygen when she thrashed about, flexing her muscles, but her cold reptilian blood could tide her over for a long time without a breath if she kept still. She might be able to outlast Fawkes in the thin air!

Soon Harry could see nothing of the combatants but an occasional glint of orange sunlight flashing from scale or feather. The terrible screeching had given way to the chirping of crickets, as though this were just another tranquil evening in the wilderness. But there was another sound, too, and Harry finally noticed and recognized it: it was the frail, tortured breathing of Snape, curled on the ground but a meter away.

Harry sat up. He had the dagger; he could put a clean end to Snape right now. There was little else he could do. Harry had no idea how to stop the venom--that sort of magic belonged to Fawkes and Peredhil, not him. Tura's kingsfoil leaves were still in his pack in the little cave, but even if he could get them in time, who knew whether they would help at all, or simply prolong the agony? And why, Harry suddenly wondered, was he so interested in helping Snape in the first place?

The answer came to him like a blow to the chest from a sledgehammer: There was *still* more of the story. Snape could never have kept the truth from Tura, and yet she had trusted him. Harry *had to* learn why--and in matter of seconds, the answers would be lost forever. He was almost out of time. Harry leaned forward clumsily to turn Snape's head and peer into his black eyes, wondering what he would see, buried deep in Snape's mind, when the man died.

Harry never had a chance to find out. A new sound distracted him, and it was growing rapidly louder. He looked up to see Nagini in free fall, twisting frantically as she plummeted. The next instant, a deep thud vibrated through the earth as the snake struck the ground some twenty feet away.

He leapt to his feet, dagger in hand, not trusting for an instant that the impact would kill her. She certainly looked flat and broken, but the Horcrux undoubtedly survived. At this point, Harry wasn't taking any chances.

Apparently Fawkes was of the same mind, as he swooped down beside the snake and, giving Harry a look of warning, began swallowing it whole. Harry's stomach

churned in sympathy, but he understood. Fawkes meant to put a magical end to this last remnant of Voldemort.

Though every fiber of his being yearned to help his familiar, Harry knew he couldn't augment this repulsive process. Fawkes kept a stern eye upon him as he stretched his neck and shook it in an effort to cram the last of the snake's body into his gullet. The residue of Dark magic visibly affected Fawkes; he began to weave and sway in stark contrast to his usual elegant grace.

"Fawkes," said Harry miserably as the phoenix took a tottering step toward him. The feathers on his belly curled and turned brown like so many autumn leaves, and not so much fell off as crumbled into dust. Still Fawkes continued to stagger as the bare patch expanded to the rest of his body, then his wings. Harry couldn't bear it; his beloved familiar was falling apart before his eyes, yet he had no idea how to rescue the phoenix. "Tell me what to do! Let me help you!"

Fawkes turned just then and hobbled in a new direction, stretching out his neck even as he collapsed. His head landed on Snape's chest.

The phoenix rubbed a tear onto the puncture wounds on Snape's forearm, rolled away, and burst into flames.

\* \* \* \* \*

Those of you who guessed Snape was Tura's paramour, pat yourselves on the back.

I wrote the ending chapters before DH came out. Originally I had only Snape bitten by Nagini, then Harry watched in shock as Fawkes came over and healed him, and after that Harry learned about Tura. I was LIVID to hear that DH was so similar--felt I had to change it or people would complain. And I like it better this way--it makes more sense that Nagini would strike Harry first out of vengeance, then strike Snape just because he was there...

## 47: The Choices of Master Fawkes

*Chapter 48 of 50*

A great many mysteries, both new and old, are revealed.

Harry pawed frantically through the ashes for the baby bird, terrified that this time, he would not find one. Fawkes had obviously endured terrible pain as a sacrifice to spare Snape just as Tura had only hours earlier, and the repetition of that pattern filled him with an irrational fear that Fawkes, too, might be lost to him forever. When he finally discovered the damp chick, Harry wept in relief as he tucked him snug and safe in his breast pocket.

An unmeasured period of time later, Snape quietly commented, "He will require feeding shortly."

Harry whirled angrily to face his former professor. "Shut up! I KNOW how to take care of him!" Wand in hand, he was panting for breath in his sudden fury, but he still couldn't bear to hex Snape. Even if he somehow fooled Tura, Fawkes would have seen through any deception. Harry *knew* it. If Fawkes was willing to suffer so terribly to save that greasy git, there *must* be a good reason.

Snape, meanwhile, gave him an automatic glare that Harry had seen many times at Hogwarts; it meant something like "Your stupidity never ceases to amaze me." Out here, however, it seemed halfhearted, missing its haughty edge. As Harry stared back at him, Snape seemed to lose all composure, the sneer fading rapidly into exhaustion and defeat, the arrogance falling away to reveal hopelessness and misery beneath. "I imagine you do," Snape finally said without a trace of sarcasm.

"You *imagine*... What's that supposed to mean?" Harry's voice shook.

Snape stared at him with a strange, distant expression. "Must I explain? You see, we never told you about this, never asked you to Bond with Fawkes--and that is *precisely* why you did it. If you'd been invited or even begged, you would have refused, because that's just the sort of willful, contrary person you are, Potter. Which is why Albus let you think it up on your own--and *voilà*, it was done."

Now it wasn't so hard to imagine hexing him. "Enough doublespeak. Fawkes suffered to help you, and now you're going to answer to me."

Snape let out a deep sigh, his shoulders slumping further. "It may take a while to explain."

Harry said nothing, but leaned back and cracked his knuckles expectantly.

"It was I who first suspected you were a Legilimagus, you know," began Snape. "Back in your fifth year, when you not only managed to Occlude me, but to follow me out of your mind and into my own. Both Albus and the Dark Lord could perform wandless Legilimency after years of study and practice, but Tura was the only sorcerer who could penetrate my mind. Until you, too, managed it."

What this had to do with Bonding to Fawkes was unclear, and Harry was far too frazzled for games. "Make your point, Snape."

"Patience, boy!" he barked angrily. "Meaningful answers take time, which, for a change, we have in abundance. Fawkes will sleep for several hours before he must be fed. But if you're in such a hurry, Potter, by all means, come into me and see it for yourself." He stared into Harry's eyes as though daring him to use Legilimency.

For a moment, Harry wondered what sort of trap Snape was attempting to set and nearly backed away. But that was pure folly. Snape had no hope of beating him at Legilimency, any more than Harry could best Snape at Potions. This was *his* magic, his realm; Harry had nothing to fear and he knew it. Snape's eyes widened ever so slightly as he recognized Harry's confidence, but he held his gaze.

Harry nodded. *All right*, he projected into Snape's mind. *Show me. All of it. But if you try anything, any deception at all, I'll kill you.*

Snape's eyes widened further, and he swallowed hard, but he still held steady. "Then follow my lead," he said.

"Once again, I have a challenge for you."

As Snape slumped into the chair in resignation, Dumbledore gazed at him kindly and continued. "Tom is manipulating Harry's dreams. I don't know his purpose, but I can't imagine it's benign. I don't want it to continue, Severus. I'd like you to teach him Occlumency."

The office disappeared as Snape put his hand over his eyes. *I know this already*, Harry thought impatiently. The memory dissipated for an instant and Snape barked, "Be

still!" before the vision resumed.

"Albus... Don't ask this of me," groaned Snape, but to Harry's surprise, he was not begging off out of loathing for Harry, but something entirely different that Harry couldn't quite place. Dumbledore entwined his fingers and leaned onto his desk, but did not speak.

Snape dropped his head forward, shaking it. "I can't do it. I'd have to expose his secrets, his inner world. I don't WANT to know anything about him! Besides, if the Dark Lord learns I have that knowledge, he will not let up until he takes it from me!"

"I understand."

"Then teach him yourself! Or send him to Tura! If anyone can manage Potter, it's she."

"I fear Miss Ondossi must join this saga at some point, but not yet," said Dumbledore gently. "I know it frightens you to relate to Harry so intimately... but I am quite certain that I cannot bear it." Dumbledore slumped in his chair with a sorrowful expression, his voice soft and quiet. "He's become the son I never had, you know. I never imagined such a thing would happen, but there it is. More proof that love is the strongest magic of all, I suppose."

Snape regarded him silently, then asked in a raspy voice, "And what makes you think I can do better?"

Dumbledore smiled wanly and leaned forward onto his elbows. "Well, you've certainly had plenty of practice. And you've always been a much better Occlumens than I."

Snape was not flattered. He knew quite well that he was a better Occlumens, but there were more pressing matters at stake. "No, no, this is ridiculous," Snape insisted. "I had to learn Legilimency before I could successfully Occlude. You know full well I can't let him inside my mind!"

Far from being deterred, Dumbledore looked positively cheery at that comment. "I understand completely, and I've already anticipated your need to teach him some Legilimency. I have something to help you keep your most dangerous secrets--a secret of my own." He opened the cabinet and brought the Penseive to his desk.

Snape's feet hit the floor hard. "A Penseive? Are you insane? These are banned for a reason--"

"I know precisely why they are banned," Dumbledore interrupted, "but you do not. All the others failed to work, because though they were modeled from this one, they did not have its power. Look closely." Dumbledore waved his wand in a complex motion over the basin. As he did so, the stone became misty, transparent, then finally disappeared, revealing a beautiful silver bowl encased within.

Snape's heart was suddenly racing. He leaned closer, gazing in reverence at the runes carved around the rim. They were elegant and flowing, more like music than words. Harry recognized the script immediately; it was the language in the Red Book. "Can this be... did it belong to The Lady?" Snape whispered. A bit of breath condensed on the surface of the metal; Snape pulled away, aghast.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Galadriel's mirror. Don't worry, you won't harm it. Touch it, Severus, it will set your heart afire with hope. Go ahead!"

Snape glanced at him dubiously, then returned to the bowl. "Never! I wouldn't think of it. Its value is greater than Hogwarts Castle and everything in it. Priceless!"

"Indeed it is. Yet worth nothing if not put to good use. You undoubtedly see why the reproductions of this Penseive lacked the power of the original."

Snape nodded, still gazing awestruck at the bowl. He finally stretched out a tentative fingertip, brushing it ever so lightly along the rim. Just the memory of that brief contact brought Harry a moment of pure ecstasy. Throwing his head back and arms wide, he broke off from Snape's mind and felt as though the entire universe had funneled through him as he stood upon the event horizon. He glimpsed two trees, silver and gold, their interwoven branches glowing with an impossible light. When the vision ended, Harry dove back into Snape's mind without even making eye contact.

When Snape finally spoke again, his voice was filled with gratitude and humility. "I am beyond honored, Albus. I think I'd do anything for the privilege of borrowing this... but what if it's not enough?"

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled as their corners crinkled up, despite the fact that he was sighing. "It may not be, you're quite right. Young Harry does have a way of circumventing barriers. You'll have to use your discretion. Although I don't like Tom playing some unknown game with him, it *is* imperative that the key elements of my plan be kept between us. I trust you to know your limitations. Teach him, cautiously, and if the risks become too great, then stop. That's all I ask."

Snape gave the silver bowl a final loving gaze, then looked up at Dumbledore, who waved his wand to restore the stone veneer. "I will do my best, but whether it'll be sufficient..."

Dumbledore warmly took Snape's hand in both of his. "That is a question I ask myself regularly. I fear we'll both learn the answers much too soon."

Snape Occluded him and Harry permitted it, leaning back against the stone wall, not quite sure what to say. He stared at Snape quizzically, who asked, "That was the first memory I routinely placed in the Penseive. Do you wish to go on to the second?"

"Is it about this plan?"

"Yes," said Snape. "Now that the plan is completed, there's no further need for secrets."

Harry replied by fixing Snape with his gaze.

Murky daylight barely revealed Dumbledore's back. Harry recognized the deep interior of the Forbidden Forest. Snape was disentangling himself from some prickly bramble which he did not bother to identify. He was deeply concerned that the headmaster had insisted they could not speak in his office; whatever he had to say, he would not even permit the portraits to hear it. Though Snape's heart was racing, his fingers were cold and pale.

Dumbledore halted suddenly and turned to face him, an infuriatingly lighthearted smile on his face. "Heavens above, is that a Scottish Primrose?" He stooped to examine the tiny purple flower and beamed. "I've never seen one this far south. A good omen, perhaps. I don't think I've ever come to this particular spot before."

Snape nodded anxiously, scanning the area for Merlin-only-knew what menacing creatures might be lurking. "Nor I, and I'd prefer to leave it as soon as possible. Can we get this discussion over with!"

"All right, Severus. I've brought you here to ask you... to kill me."

Harry ripped himself from Snape's mind in a fury. "Liar!" he shouted. "Never! You made that up!"

Snape gripped Harry's arms firmly. "Say what you want, Potter, but that memory is genuine. I couldn't believe it myself at the time. Do you want to see it or not?"

Harry glowered over the rims of his glasses. "I'm not sure. I think I want to slit your throat instead." He meant it, too; he was already fingering the handle of Voldemort's dagger sticking out of his boot.

Snape narrowed his eyes, then closed them, tipping back his head as far as it would go in an act of both surrender and defiance. The sight infuriated Harry even further, but he was forced to admit that he wanted to see the memory. He seized the front of Snape's hair and yanked his head forward again, gliding into his mind the second their eyes met.

"...to kill me."

Snape couldn't answer; he was speechless with shock and horror. He wondered if his ears had played some sort of trick on him. Waving his hands in the air, he backed away, shaking his head frantically. "What... what... Are you under the Imperius?" He reached quickly for his wand, but Dumbledore raised both hands abruptly, gesturing for him to stop.

"Steady on, Severus. I don't mean right this minute, here beside this lovely flower," he said with an impish grin. Snape dropped his hands to his sides, but continued to stare wide-eyed at Dumbledore.

"I've been studying this diary business," said Dumbledore. *What diary? Tom Riddle's?* thought Harry.

"Yes," Snape replied aloud, then they were back in his memory and Dumbledore continued. "It concerns me greatly that Harry was unable to destroy it alone. It very nearly succeeded in killing him."

*I've always had help from Ron and Hermione*--Harry began, but Snape curtly asserted, "Be still!" Harry reluctantly returned his attention to the memory.

Snape nodded. "The Basilisk would have had Potter if not for Fawkes."

"Quite. But had I been present in Hogwarts at the time, Fawkes may not have done the same. You know he always looks out for my safety. But unless I am drastically mistaken, Harry will ultimately need his protection. He must face even more dangerous opponents than the Basilisk."

Snape felt an uncomfortable understanding beginning to bud. "Then you must explain it to Fawkes! Convince him to confer his protection upon the child!"

"You know it's not that simple," Dumbledore chided gently. "Fawkes Bound himself to me. His loyalty lies with me until I die. And we are nearing dangerous times; he will only grow more and more protective of me as the threat deepens. I cannot ask him to choose Harry over myself, any more than I could ask him to grow gills and become a fish."

Snape's voice was a ragged whisper. "You want to free Fawkes from his Bond. So you ask me... to murder." The two men faced one another silently for a long time. "You understand that I left *his* service so I need never kill again?"

Dumbledore averted his eyes. "You know I understand. This is *not* murder. My life will be given willingly to put an end to Voldemort's reign. I only need you to help me... carry out the mechanisms of that process."

"But why me?" Snape shouted, making Dumbledore jump in surprise. "There are dozens of Death Eaters in London right now who would love the opportunity. Let one of them do it, what difference would it make? Fawkes will be freed either way!"

"Oh, that's undoubtedly true," said Dumbledore in a soothing tone. "But I'm afraid I can't trust one of them to perform the deed at the time and place of my choosing. Besides, Tom will hold the one who ends my life in great esteem. I can think of no better way to guarantee that you will be at Voldemort's side when Harry faces him in the final hour... and an unexpected ally could make all the difference."

Dumbledore drew closer, placing his hands on Snape's shoulders. Snape was trembling violently, hyperventilating, panicking. Dumbledore's hands were warm and strong, a father's reassuring grip upon a terrified child. Snape coughed once, twice, then allowed a sob to escape his throat. He threw his arms around the headmaster and pulled him close.

"Don't ask this, Albus. You... you're my friend. I didn't have the stomach to cut down total strangers! How can I..." Snape couldn't bring himself to say it.

Dumbledore stroked his back with one arm, cradling him with the other. "Because you'll know it's my *wish*. Because it's for the greater good." He gently withdrew from Snape's grasp, but held onto his hands firmly. "Because we *both* know if Harry does not stop Tom Riddle, no one will."

Snape stepped back, feeling lightheaded and growing very nauseated. "I don't... I can't... This is too much."

Dumbledore continued to hold his hands. "I have indeed asked a terrible thing of you. But I know no one else that can make such a ~~vow~~*and* keep it hidden from Tom. Take your time, Severus. Let yourself adjust to the idea, and if you can accept it, give me your answer then. Harry's not even thirteen years old; the crisis won't peak for years yet. This needn't be rushed."

Dumbledore released Snape's clammy hands, to produce a few wrapped packets from a pocket of his robes. "Chocolate frog?" he asked warmly.

As the memory dissolved, Harry stared slackjawed at Snape, who said quietly, "In my whole life, Potter, I have won the love of two people. Both are dead. One by my own hand." His face screwed up with the effort of holding back tears.

"And one by mine," croaked Harry. Snape's face contorted briefly with despair, but he forced it back to neutrality.

"Both to stop that monster!" he blurted furiously, slamming his fist down on the cold earth. He stared, wild-eyed at Harry, panting, then it was as though he were crumpling inside, losing more of his angry resolve with every breath, until all that was left was sorrow. He buried his face in his hands, shaking with sobs, though he made no sound.

Harry slumped back onto the ground, reeling from information overload. The pieces were all there, he could even grasp it, yet he was dazed by the magnitude of it. He rolled it over and over in his mind, only dimly aware that Snape was present at all.

Hours could have passed, or minutes; Harry neither knew nor cared how much time had elapsed. He had found a sticking point in the story. Focusing at last on the current time and space, he quietly asked Snape, "What did you mean?"

Snape, who had long since exhausted his limited capacity for tears, answered, "By what?"

"When you said, 'What makes you think I can do better'."

Snape cocked his head slightly. "I said that?"

"When Dumbledore told you that I was... like the son he never had. That he couldn't bear to teach me Legilimency. You said, 'What makes you think I can do better?' Why?"

Snape stared pointedly at the ground. "I think the simplest way to answer that," he finally said, "is to show you more of the third memory. Rather fitting, I suppose." He looked up. "It is of a more personal nature, it has nothing to do with plans and promises."

Harry's face softened and he gazed only at the surface of Snape's eyes. "May I?" he asked respectfully.

Snape set his jaw and nodded.

For the first few seconds, Harry was completely disoriented. There was the lake at Hogwarts, but it seemed more like a reflection in a mirror. He also seemed to be in some sort of strange dark hole; he could not see his feet and there was grass tickling his cheek. But then he realized he was looking out at a forest of legs, ankles, shoes; he was hanging upside down, and to his horror, his robes were dangling around his head, exposing the rest of him for all those people to view.

His father's voice: "Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?"

Raucous laughter. The drawstrings of his underwear twitched against his belly. Murderous rage, cut with burning humiliation. Then the steady voice of Remus Lupin. "Prongs, come on. If I let you do it, I'll be in trouble. Give it a rest."

Harry felt Snape's relief as the suspension spell broke and he landed in a disheveled heap with all his clothes on. Though he still despised Lupin, a tiny glimmer of respect formed deep in his heart, not because the prefect had stopped the assault, but because he had done it without suggesting that James Potter show him mercy, or worse, pity. Snape stood up carefully, yanking his robes into position, but to Harry's surprise, he didn't give a thought to seizing his wand and casting a retributive hex at Potter. The only thing on his mind was Lily Evans.

Snape was on Platform 9 3/4, cringing in embarrassment as his mother attempted to arrange his hair neatly. He couldn't wait to get on the train, to escape that nightmarish house for the first time in his life. There were so many other children, more than he had ever seen in one place before. There was a pretty girl, a redhead, just a few steps away. She seemed genuinely sad to say goodbye to her parents. He watched her in fascination; the concept utterly baffled him.

She was in his Potions class at the next desk, preparing Shrinking Solution. He happened to look her way as she was adding daisy roots to her cauldron, and he noticed that she was doing something strange. The instructions had called for them to be chopped as evenly as possible and added all at once. She had separated them into little piles, however, which she was adding one by one. He set down his own knife and roots, and leaned over for a closer look.

"Do you mind?" she said shortly.

"I'm just curious. Why'd you separate them like that?"

She flattened her lips a bit, then looked at him with a sort of odd consternation. "I, uh, don't know, really. It just seemed to make sense. I mean, no matter how carefully you chop them, they're going to be different sizes. The width of the root varies; if the pieces are all the same *length*, some will have a larger radius... It's just not clear in the book exactly what they mean by 'same size.' I mean, short of peeling them and cutting them into perfect cubes, you just can't get them exactly the same in every dimension..." She stopped, putting her hand over her mouth abashedly, as though she'd used a vulgar word.

Snape didn't even notice; he was peering closely at the little heaps, nodding. "Of course, of course. So you've separated them by, what? Weight, it appears. And you're adding the heaviest first?" He looked up at her, finding to his great surprise that she was staring at him in what seemed like wonder. He frowned and turned around quickly, but there was nothing unusual going on behind him. Once again, he was baffled. "What?" he said abruptly, expecting to become the butt of some prank.

"Nothing, nothing, it's just... most people tease me about this. That I... notice things like that," she said, again hiding her mouth behind her hand.

He furrowed his brow. "I notice things too." She cleared her throat awkwardly, and though there were no lines to read between, he got the message anyway. "Though I doubt my classmates despise me on the sole basis of what I notice," he said coolly, and returned to his desk.

He suspected she was feigning friendliness out of guilt or pity when she spoke to him again in their next Potions class, politely asking his opinion on crushing seeds versus simply cracking them open. He meant only to give her a cursory answer, but found himself caught up in a lengthy discussion. And so it was in the next class, and the next. He decided it was rather enjoyable to have a colleague that took their studies seriously, unlike the childish morons that comprised the rest of their class.

Snape wasn't allowed to be in the Slytherin common room at this hour, but he hadn't trusted himself to make it through the night without murdering his idiot roommates. He was far from the hearth and had deliberately turned the couch away from the fire in order to avoid discovery, so he woke up frequently from the chill. But this time, there were people talking; the firelight dancing on the wall above him was emerald green. He recognized the voice of Lucius Malfoy, an intimidating 7th year student. Snape didn't dare sit up lest the leather couch creak, but he could lift his head to peek over the armrest with one eye, the other pressed hard into the back cushion. Several older students were speaking to someone through the fire, then began, one by one, to step into the flames and vanish. Holding his breath, Snape heard one say, "Knockturn Alley," and later, another. After the last one stepped over the hearth, Snape vaulted the couch and raced to the fire. Not knowing how much Floo Powder they had used, he dared to wait but a few seconds before jumping into the flames to follow them.

He had no sooner set foot in the destined hearth when he was jostled by another wizard trying to come through. The students had already vanished among the darkness and crowds. Climbing out, he noticed that most of the people around him were wearing either masks or hoods; he felt uncomfortably exposed, pulling up his collar as far as it would go.

Following the throng, he heard mutters of "the Dark Lord" and a thrill coursed through his body. People had spoken of Lord Voldemort around the Slytherin common room, but who knew what was fact versus speculation? He was eager to learn a few things firsthand, and began poking his head over people's shoulders, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man.

A hand suddenly clamped painfully on his arm. Snape realized with horror that in his haste to reach the Floo, he had left his wand on the couch. "Little mice who leave their cage at night should know better than to mingle with cats," whispered a malevolent voice. Lucius Malfoy looked down at him coldly, digging his fingertips painfully into his skin.

Snape glared, jerking his whole torso in an unsuccessful attempt to wrest himself from the older student's grasp. "What do you care, Malfoy?" he sneered. "I have as much a right to sneak out as you."

Malfoy released him with a condescending smile. "At the moment, perhaps. But after tonight, the gulf between my 'rights' and yours will be wider than you can imagine."

Snape licked his lips. "Are you going to pledge yourself to him? Tonight?" Malfoy didn't answer, but he raised his head higher. Snape was too awestruck to speak for a moment, then breathed, "I want to serve, too."

"Oh, you'll serve all right, if you hang around much longer--they'll serve your blood for the first toast. Get back to Hogwarts, little idiot, and come speak to me in a week. Now!"

Snape felt a brilliant new confidence from that day forth. He had a goal, a secret; it didn't matter what childish nonsense was perpetrated against him now, because his day would come very, very soon.

Bolstered with new confidence, he began to initiate conversations with Lily in class, and came to appreciate her insight during tricky procedures. Between the two of them, they found ways to improve nearly every recipe in their textbooks every year, though Professor Slughorn only seemed to notice Lily's work. Snape resented that, and didn't understand it until during their 5th year, when he began to notice Lily too.

It was rather a dilemma, actually, because he was deeply indoctrinated with the Death Eaters by then, and Lucius had even told Lord Voldemort about his uncommon talent as a potionmaker. There was no chance of backing out of the service he'd practically promised the Dark Lord, even if he was inclined to try. Instead, Snape daydreamed that he and Lily would offer themselves together as a team. Surely the Dark Lord would accept her skill, even though she was Muggleborn.

But there was simply no way to discuss the concept with Lily. Dumbledore would be livid if he learned that students were meeting with Death Eaters right under his very nose. The only place Snape dared speak about the Dark Lord was in the Slytherin common room, and no Gryffindor would ever set foot in there.

Snape dropped into an upside-down heap, disheveled but still clothed. Potter would pay for that, but not today. O.W.L.s were nearly finished, summer holidays were just around the corner, and, having followed Lily Evans out into the blinding sunlight, he was determined to finish what he started. He pushed through the crowd milling about like so many sheep and saw that she was already halfway around the castle. Once she got inside, she was sure to disappear. He ran after her, shouting "Lily!" when she reached the stone stairs.

She spun around, her face contorting when she saw who had called. "Oh, it's Lily now, is it?" she said in a surprisingly quiet voice, though there was no mistaking the rage behind it. "I thought it was 'filthy little Mudblood,' or has something changed *again* in the last two minutes?" She was shaking, her hands on her hips, with her wand

clutched in the right.

Snape stopped short. That was a natural phrase in his daily crowd. It had slipped out so automatically he hadn't even noticed. He felt a strange twanging sensation everywhere at once, like plunging into cold water. Snape had insulted people viciously as long as he could remember, but this was the first time in his life that he *cared* that his words had inflicted pain. He stood agape, utterly at a loss for words, until she rolled her eyes and started to spin away.

"Lily." His voice was so deep and contrite, it startled him, but not nearly as much as the next words that escaped his lips. "I'm so sorry."

She stopped in mid-turn, staring vaguely toward Hogsmeade. "Sorry. Oh, that's good. That makes it all better. I've been your only friend for five years and you call me a--"

"Please don't say it!" he cried, and he ran the last few feet between them, reaching for her, then froze again. It was as if his body was acting on autopilot, with his head merely floating along for the ride. He didn't like it. Yet when he seized the controls, he realized he had no idea what to do, what to say. She was staring at him now, still simmering with anger, but at least she was there...

She was *right* there. He could smell her hair. There were always vapors in the Potions classroom that overwhelmed the nose, but out here in the fresh air, every breath he took was rich with her and it was making his mouth water.

"Lily," he said, "you are so... important to me, I can't even tell you how ashamed I am. You saw what was happening. I was beside myself! I said anything that would hurt him--"

"You hurt *me*, Severus."

"I know." His stomach fell somewhere down below the Earth's mantle. Tears were threatening to spill from her eyes any second. Crying either preceeded or followed violence in his limited experience; he had no idea what his *proper* reaction ought to be. Then there was no more time to think about it, there were the tears, gliding down her cheek. This was a disaster. All he'd wanted to do was ask if he could visit her over the summer!

Once again, with the mind frantically distracted, his hand went off on its own and caught a teardrop with a fingertip, then brought it up to his lip.

She drew a tiny, rapid breath, and there was something new in her eyes, curiosity, or uncertainty, something questioning, hopeful. Snape leaned forward, retracing the path his hand had just taken, bringing his mouth to her cheek. Her eyes blazed before they fell shut, his lips dragging over her skin as she turned her head to meet him--

Harry Occluded so abruptly that he and Snape both jumped as though the ground had suddenly dropped three inches.

"If I ever feel your hands under her clothes, I'll kill you," said Harry in a dull voice, palming the hilt of the dagger again.

Snape scoffed in disgust. "Oh, you're a fine one to talk, Potter, having seduced and then slaughtered the woman I loved. I believe you've more than avenged yourself for my awkward teenage snogging with Lily Evans."

Harry's head bowed in contrition; the greasy git had a valid point. "It wasn't like that," he finally said heavily. "I loved her. Last night... well, neither of us knew if we'd live another day. No, she knew she wouldn't; she had every intention to die by my wand."

Snape held up his hands to silence Harry, his face contorted with pain again, but when the grief subsided, he nodded with a faint smirk. "I see. My Tura. Always in the moment, that one."

They sat musing in silence for a little while. Harry finally asked, "So what finally happened that summer?"

"Do you want to see it?"

Harry shuddered. "I'll pass. Just tell me the abridged version. Leave out the snogging."

"I did ask to visit her. She gave me permission." Snape's eyes unfocused. "I practically lived there, actually. Her parents tolerated me, but her sister, Petunia... Heavens above, Potter, I don't know how you lived with that wretched creature. Petty, jealous, utterly spineless, and determined to make everyone suffer just as she imagined she did. She brought home some smarmy bloke to prove a neurotic point about being as attractive or popular as Lily, I didn't quite follow it. I only met him the one time, but I could never forget him--a more pathetic, foppish git than Percy Weasley! Simply ghastly; Herman or Irving or something..."

"Vernon," said Harry glumly.

"Indeed! How did... oh." Snape made a face like he'd bitten unexpectedly into a bar of soap and then discovered a dead rat inside. "At any rate, I obviously wanted Lily to join the Death Eaters with me. She was a typical Gryffindor, but I thought she would respond to reason and logic. I *truly* believed it was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord assumed control, and if she only *understood* how powerful he really was, she'd choose to join him, rather than die. So I endeavored to convince her.

"I taught her all manner of Dark spells, thinking that if she saw the many ways they could be employed, she might accept them as a useful tool for her magical arsenal. My grandparents studied the Dark Arts at Kemet, in Cairo, and had trained me since I was very small. I knew many Dark incantations that were useful and practical."

Harry's eyes bulged out and once again he fingered the handle of the dagger. "You tricked her into performing Dark magic without knowing it?"

"Oh, get off your high thestral, Potter!" Snape spat. "Not all Dark magic is evil, just as not all the approved spells are benign. Plenty of jinxes and hexes might as well be classified as Dark. Well, there are many Dark charms and potions that have nothing to do with controlling or harming others. Most spells were classified during the Great Wizard Compendia in the ninth century, and more often than not those decisions were based on ignorance or politics. Which you should have learned in History of Magic, if it weren't for that fool Binns and his obsession with the Goblin Wars." Snape shook his head with a look of pure contempt.

"But as I was *saying*," he continued, "I taught Lily all the spells I knew that were of a polite nature, telling her that I learned them from my grandparents. Being Muggleborn, she knew she'd missed out on many aspects of wizard culture, so she was naturally curious about 'family spells' being passed down through generations.

"We reached a crossroads, naturally, when I ran out of innocuous charms to share with her. Being young and foolish, I didn't give her any time to test and enjoy her new magic. I stepped right up to inform her that these were, in fact, Dark Arts, and wouldn't she like to continue to learn?" He winced with shame. "I spent many, many hours reliving that conversation, Potter. It taught me a great deal about the rules of persuasion. For when your mother realized what I was really driving at, she threw me out--bodily--from the house, and from her life.

"I can't describe how much I missed her in Potions. My life has always been broken down into discrete compartments. What happened in each world stayed there, you see--it had no effect on another persona. But Lily wasn't like that at all. I was stunned to find she had no intention to continue our work... or our friendship. I may have even been in love with her--I certainly thought so at the time, but looking back, it was all twisted up in loneliness and rebellion." He paused, wrinkling his nose.

"At any rate, Lil was determined to be a Model Citizen, to show all of Hogwarts how to stand up to the Death Eaters. She used the very spells I'd taught her that summer to encourage people to think up defenses. She left the Slug Club because of its ties to Slytherin House, which meant she spent nearly all her time with her Gryffindor cronies."

Snape stared at the ground for some time before resuming. "I suppose I rather drove her into James Potter's arms. He was quite clear on his stance regarding Dark Arts and Death Eaters. They must have had some lively conversations in Gryffindor Tower. When I saw the two of them together, that last year..." Snape's fists clenched briefly.

"I wanted to crush James Potter the day I met him. When he humiliated me after the O.W.L.s, down by the lake, I *vowed* to do it. But then that idiot Black set me up to be devoured by a werewolf, and suddenly I owed James Potter my life."

Harry bristled at the insult to Sirius, but he had recognized long before that his godfather, on that night *had* been acting like a complete idiot.

"I think the Dark Lord enjoyed the irony," Snape continued. "I longed to kill Potter, but I was bound by a life-debt. V-Voldemort had no love for Potter, of course, but he, erm, *appreciated* twists of fate such as that. He sent me to spy on Dumbledore, and I took him the prophecy, not knowing what in particular it meant. I soon discovered that it was just the weapon I'd been waiting for. After you were born in the seventh month, killing Potter became a top priority for him. The father and the son. He wanted to take the Longbottoms first, the boy was a pureblood and presumably more dangerous, but I helped convince him to start with Potter."

"You mean with me," said Harry.

Snape gave him a pleading look. "You were nothing but a mewling little heap of smelly diapers at that time. I'd never even seen you. I couldn't bear to look upon the child of Lily and another man..." Snape paused, turning his head.

"When James Potter was gone," he finally continued, "I was sure Lily would come to her senses. I thought if she saw it firsthand, his power--she'd resign herself to service." Snape stopped, suddenly looking like a very old man.

"When Voldemort killed her," said Harry slowly, "that was when you renounced him?"

Snape nodded.

"My mother's death set you free," said Harry.

Snape cocked his head. "I suppose so, in some way. There were other issues, with which I won't bore you. But I learned I had a heart the day it was broken, and the guilt, Potter--" Snape's body curled as though a knife had been thrust in his chest "--that I had directed him to her..."

Snape's obvious grief tugged at Harry's heart. "It wasn't just you, you know," he said softly. "My mum and dad had enemies on all sides--just for being who they were, and for being my parents. You know Pettigrew betrayed them, helping Voldemort get past the Fidelius Charm. But so did Umbridge. She drove him to Godric's Hollow that night, so he wouldn't trip any wards with magic."

Snape's eyes bulged. "Dolores Umbridge?" Harry nodded. "That cow!"

Snape clearly wanted to inquire further, but Harry waved dismissively. "She's been dealt with. Trust me. I want to hear the rest of your story."

Snape gritted his teeth, but continued. "Very well. There's little left to tell, of course. When I heard what had transpired in Godric's Hollow, I threw myself at Dumbledore's mercy. Despite everything I'd done, Albus took me in. He protected me from the other Death Eaters *and* from the Wizengamot. To this day I don't know why he didn't denounce me on the spot, but he chose to forgive instead."

Snape sat back, and Harry felt another pang of empathy. "I suppose he never told you he was there that night," he said tentatively.

"What?!" Snape wasn't feigning innocence. Harry had never seen him so horrified.

"It's true," Harry sighed. "He was right there in my bedroom when it all happened. He was on the alert that night, but didn't know what would happen, or where. So he was checking in on several places. By the time he got around to Godric's Hollow, my dad had already been murdered. He had to let Voldemort mark me like the Prophecy said, so he had to stand and watch as my mother was killed."

Snape went deathly white, then lurched a few feet to the side and vomited.

A few minutes later, he crawled back and flopped on his side to face Harry. "That certainly adds a new perspective on events," he said weakly, then fell silent for a while.

"In that light, I suppose Albus was practically an accomplice, and had little choice but to forgive me," he finally commented. "At the time, however, I was awed, *humbled*, that anyone could be so generous. Only then did I understand the true nature of power. Voldemort's authority had impressed me greatly, but compared to Dumbledore's, it was but a house of cards. His hold on the Death Eaters was precarious, maintained only by constant threats. People gave themselves to Dumbledore willingly, without oath or ceremony, and stayed with him for life. Where Riddle required the Imperius curse, Albus needed only to wink."

Harry nodded. One didn't need to be branded with a Mark to join the Order of the Phoenix.

"Anyway, with time, my grief began to dull. Albus taught me that I could *atone* for what I'd done, and of course, Tura came along. I started to feel that I had a place in the world, that I was worthy to... remain alive." Snape paused.

"Then one year I was watching the new students arriving as I'd always done, and saw James Potter walking down the Great Hall just as he had 20 years before--with Lily's eyes, filled with wonder, right in the middle of his face." He sighed, interlocking his fingers and regarding them dully. "That gave me quite a turn. It's rather humbling when your most shameful secret walks right up and makes himself at home where everyone can see him.

"You were a constant reminder to me, Mr. Potter, that I had betrayed a dear woman out of selfishness and spite. I was playing a very dangerous role at that time, mingling with Death Eaters and spying for Albus. They expected me to despise you just as they did. So it was straightforward, really, to simply show the contempt I felt whenever I saw you. No one suspected it was not necessarily meant for you, but for my own despicable choices."

He sat up straight to look Harry in the eye, his tone taking on the cold fluidity to which Harry had long grown accustomed. "So, in answer to your original query, I don't remember asking Albus why he thought I could do better. You may not believe it, Potter, but despite all appearances, I have never hated you. I hated the reminder of what I had done. I hated your youth and your innocence, for you needed to discard both of those before you could rid us of the Dark Lord. But even Albus didn't understand that, even though you were James Potter's son, I never hated you. Because you were also Lily's, and for that reason alone I..." His breath hitched in his throat, but the unspoken words blared in his thoughts like a neon sign. *Lily's son, whom I have no choice but to love.*

Without even looking up, Harry charged into Snape's mind with all the power he could muster. If this was all some gigantic fraud, he was going to find out *now*. Harry ruthlessly forced open the compartments in Snape's mind where secrets lay hidden, not caring whether they were completely unrelated; wispy threads of terrors and shames, from childhood, from his years under Voldemort. The individual memories were no more than a blur, but their cumulative import came to him cleanly, reliably. It was just as it had been the night he Bonded to Fawkes, except this was but a single lifetime--it took only a matter of minutes for him to understand it all.

Snape lay curled on the ground, deathly white and wide-eyed. Harry felt that numbing calm descend on him, as it always did when he ransacked an unsuspecting mind. He rose to his feet, and extended his hand.

"Get up, Severus. Let's go home."

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Bear in mind that these last chapters were written long before DH came out. JK Rowling and I clearly were thinking along the same lines as to Snape's motives, but I wasn't too crazy about her implementation. I hope you enjoy my slightly less obsessed Snape.



# 48: The Boon That Is His Due

Chapter 49 of 50

Harry sets out to right some very old wrongs.

The Reverend Vernon Dursley was in a foul mood. This was not particularly unusual. He believed in the God of the Old Testament, One who did not forgive evil, but smote it with a terrible vengeance. He preached the Word of brimstone and plagues, not frivolities like salvation or redemption. His subject matter was not for the fawning or faint of heart.

The Forces of Darkness, however, seemed to be gaining the upper hand of late. He and Dudley had been *removed* from the pastures in which they'd held their last two revivals. This, too, was not unusual, as the Reverend Dursley tended to get a little too worked up about the Occult toward the end of a good sermon, which often resulted in small but hysterical riots. For a long time, it was sufficient to pack up and move to the next village once the heretics began persecuting them, but their reputation was preceeding them at last. The last town had run them out before they'd even put up their makeshift tent, let alone passed the hat.

The Reverend Dursley had adapted quite well to his misfortunes, and had no qualms about staying in the same seedy inns as the least of his flock. Without any recent donations, however, he and Dudley resorted to sleeping bags under the heavens. Clearly it was time for a change.

After shouting at Dudley to turn off his flashlight and conserve the batteries, The Reverend Dursley waited until his son was asleep, then took the light himself and studied a worn map. He resigned glumly that they would have to dig deep into their reserves and purchase bus fare, in order to get far enough away to enjoy anonymity once more. He reckoned they could afford to travel roughly fifty miles, eighty if Dudley could make do with the remains of their dinner rations in lieu of buying breakfast. Setting down the map, he peered hopefully into the can hanging from its makeshift stand over their small campfire. It was empty. The cheeky brat must have dug into it while his back was turned. Fine, then. Fifty miles it would be.

He clicked off the flashlight and blundered his way into his sleeping bag. Realizing that Dudley was monopolizing their "pillow" (that is, the folded-up canvas of their revival tent), The Reverend Dursley gave his son a devout shove and yanked the bundle out from under his head. Dudley snorted and mumbled something about his turn to ride the pony, then resumed snoring.

It seemed like he had just managed to wriggle into a marginally comfortable position and drift off to sleep when a very bright flashlight was shining in his face. "What's all this, then?" said an angry voice. "No camping allowed here; this is private property!"

The Reverend Dursley had handled such people before. He quickly went through his checklist: No uniform, no snarling dog, no sharp farm implements. Very good. Upon closer look, the intruder was wearing a nightshirt and robe--even better. Just the sort of chestnut that might grant a "man of the cloth" the kindness of a good night's sleep in a spare bedroom--and possibly even breakfast. He put on his most unctuous smile and sat up to persuade the good fellow--

CRACK! Both men fell to the ground as, paradoxically, Dudley lurched upright. How could there be thunder when the sky was cloudless? The Reverend Dursley looked over at the landowner, whose eyes were bulging with as much fear and confusion as his own. But then the voices began, and all became painfully clear.

"See? Here we are."

"We should be spread out over an area the size of a Quidditch pitch, you lunatic! That was much, MUCH too far to Apparate in one go!"

"Merlin's pointy hat, give it a rest! I told you we'd be fine! I think killing a Dark Lord has boosted my overall power."

"More accurately, boosted your *ego*, Potter."

Potter? POTTER? The Reverend Dursley turned purple at the word, recognizing at last the first speaker: *Petunia's* nephew, that cursed, evil boy who had ruined his life. He patted frantically for his leatherbound Bible, the one he kept nearby at all times. Opening the front cover, he snatched the small handgun tucked neatly into the divot he had carved into the pages. Fueled by righteousness, he leapt to his feet to carry out the Lord's Will.

Sadly, The Reverend Dursley had disregarded certain secular realities such as the sleeping bag swaddling his legs, and his son's rotund body quivering alongside him. Within seconds, he was reduced to a helpless tangle of flabby limbs, uttering language most unbecoming a vicar.

"I don't believe it," said Severus Snape, "I know that voice."

"My uncle," said Harry, quite astounded and considerably less upbeat than he'd been a moment earlier.

The Reverend Dursley sputtered in fury at the blasphemous notion that he was related to this, this, this Scion of Lucifer and fumbled for the pistol, which he'd dropped when he toppled over Dudley. The wizards, some twenty feet away, stared at him a brief moment.

"What the devil is he doing in the middle of nowhere, floundering about in a sleeping bag and swearing a blue streak?" said Snape.

Harry shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. Let's just get to Headquarters, shall we?"

The Reverend Dursley finally managed to wrest his upper body free and get hold of the handgun. He swung his arm over his head in a wide arc, too frantically eager to fire off a shot to bother taking aim. At the same time, *Petunia's* nephew put his hand on the forearm of his (vaguely familiar) demonic companion and looked expectantly at some sort of bird perched on his shoulder. The Reverend Dursley had barely squeezed the trigger when all three disappeared with another deafening crack.

Headquarters was dark and empty, so much so that Harry had a moment of sheer panic as he frantically tried to remember if the moon was full. Fawkes, though still half his normal size and only partially fledged, hopped confidently from his shoulder to the railing of the stairs and began to sing, which surely meant there was no werewolf present.

Snape poked Harry's arm rapidly. "The portrait! Heavens above, Potter, make him be quiet!"

Harry caught his hand and said reassuringly, "No worries, the portrait's gone." Snape stared at him dubiously, but as the sounds of waking began to rumble down from the upper bedrooms unaccompanied by the screeching of Walburga Black, he began to relax. In fact, he looked almost more relieved than he had when Voldemort was killed.

In truth, Harry wished the phoenix would quiet down, but it was rather too late for that. He would have much preferred an inconspicuous entry. *We ARE the Order of the Phoenix*, he reminded himself, bracing for the inevitable rush of enthusiastic greetings.

At the first sound of footsteps descending the stairs, Fawkes hopped from the banister and waddled over to Snape and tugged his robe until the professor picked him up, without interrupting the song resonating through the stairwell. Snape shrank back into the recess of the front door. It was probably best if his presence was not noticed right away, so Harry wordlessly lit the lamp at the foot of the stairs and stepped under it.

This proved a very wise move, as the first person down the stairs was Sirius Black. When he caught sight of Sirius, Snape hissed several of the same words Vernon Dursley had just used back in the pasture. *Oops*, thought Harry. *I probably should have mentioned Sirius was alive again.* But by then his godfather had cleared the stairs and tackled him with such vigor that the wind was crushed right out of him.

"HARRY! Harry! You're back! You made it!" Sirius swung him round and round as though he were a child. Both of them were a bit dizzy when Sirius finally set him down, which was a convenient excuse to hang on to one another as others stormed down the stairs. Remus, Tonks, Moody, and a dozen unknown members of the Order were upon them in an instant, creating what felt like a human logpile on top of Harry.

Tonks, sobbing hysterically, wouldn't let him go. "I knew you made it, Harry, I knew it, I knew it!" she repeated, plastering his face and neck with so many kisses that he shrugged apologetically at Remus. Lupin tipped his head back and laughed, then promptly joined Tonks, cheerfully adding smooches of his own on the other cheek. Harry reckoned this was what it felt like to be a piece of corn-on-the-cob.

Amidst the rush of welcome, someone asked, "Where's Ondossi?" The truth must have shown in Harry's face, as the revelry suddenly went quiet and somber. He steeled himself and said only, "She died." Nearly everyone bowed their heads in respect or tribute, but Sirius came around to face him, pulling him into a tight embrace.

Laying his head on his godfather's shoulder, Harry was overcome with emotion. Battling with Voldemort, being poisoned by Nagini's bite, witnessing--nay *participating in*--his lover's death: he'd been running on adrenaline alone for hours and it was all catching up to him. But Sirius would *understand*. He, too, had watched his friends perish; though he had not cast the curses himself, he had led the murderer straight to their door. He knew that unclean feeling of betraying his loved ones, however unintentional. He knew the exhaustion of straining to one's physical limits out of horror and necessity.

Harry's hands had been dangling awkwardly at his sides, but he suddenly clenched Sirius fiercely. He'd never been so glad to have his godfather close by, for this was the only person on earth who could possibly understand him. The only one he could ever talk to, who could possibly comprehend what he'd done...

... except for Snape.

Harry pulled back suddenly and looked Sirius firmly in the eye. It would take hours to explain it, and he was too weary for the inevitable arguments and doubts. It was time to settle the score once and for all, right now.

Gripping Sirius's shoulder with one hand, Harry extended the other toward the front door. When nothing happened right away, he beckoned, peering deep into the dark shadows with calm certainty. Severus Snape emerged slowly from the shadows, eliciting gasps from everyone present. Sirius clamped his fingers around Harry's midsection.

Harry continued to gesture for Snape to come closer. He turned to look at each person there, as if confirming that all were paying attention. Once he'd made the rounds, he turned back to the two wizards, bitter enemies long before Harry was even born.

Without a word, he flung his arms about both of their necks and pulled both of them to his chest, pressing their faces to either side of his own. They could not recoil from him, he knew, and though both of them stiffened, Harry would not let go. "It's over," he said, not just to them, but to everyone there. "No more enemies. We've all lost too much. It ends tonight, do you hear me? It has to end *tonight*."

Silently, after a moment's pause, Remus Lupin quietly stepped forward and placed his gentle hands on the shoulders of both Sirius and Severus, right alongside Harry's. "Yes," he said, relief obvious in his voice. "It's time."

"An Auror!" Harry spat. "That's a laugh. I'm the Darkest wizard alive today, outside of Azkaban."

It was three weeks after Victory Day. The entire Order had become the darlings of Wizard society, wined and dined by wealthy and powerful sorcerers on every continent. Some, such as Fred and George, were enjoying the spotlight, planning business ventures in new markets. Others, like Mr. Weasley, were making diplomatic connections with his political counterparts around the world--who were all too happy to meet and mingle with the Forces that Triumphed over Darkness.

Harry, however, was sick to death of the whole business. Every time he saw a news reporter he fled, remembering all too well Rita Skeeter and her tendency to ignore what he actually said and "quoting" him as she saw fit. He granted one interview to Luna's father at the *Quibbler*, and that was all of the contact that the press had with the Scourge of Evil.

Not that the press respected Harry's wish to be left alone--far from it, they hounded him any time he left Headquarters (which remained concealed under the Fidelius Charm just to keep reporters away). But deep in their heart of hearts, each reporter *understood* on some primal level that whatever Harry had done to He Who Must Not Be Named could easily be repeated on He Or She Who Makes Too Big A Pest Of Themselves. Harry had a new, dark intensity in his emerald eyes, one that gave pause to strangers, and even friends. The moment of recognition, in which eyes opened wide and jaws dropped at the sudden, fearful recognition that Harry was a *predator*, that was more than enough time for Harry to Apparate a few hundred miles away from the paparazzi.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Order were unable to escape so easily. They lacked Harry's murderous edge, and the press was not daunted even by the fearsome Sirius Black, who Made Voldemort Mortal Again (and had been Sadly Misunderstood all those years regarding that Peter Pettigrew business). They all wanted to hear the story of the great Battle of Hogwarts straight from the original sources, even though Dumbledore's Pensieve had been rigged up to replay the entire adventure from several perspectives. The inner circle of the Order came to dread the daily "Victory Parties," at which they were lucky to wolf down an hors d'oeuvre or two before the press would swarm around them.

At last all of the Important People had thrown their luncheons, teas, and parties and were returning to everyday matters, leaving the exhausted witches and wizards at number twelve, Grimmauld Place in peace. On this day Harry, Ron and Hermione were sprawled around the drawing room, eating their first meal together in a month, and pondering their future.

Ron wadded up the nearest sheet of paper and threw it at Harry playfully. "Well, that'd give the rest of us a cushy job--all we'd have to do is sit around the office and keep an eye on you," he said. Harry capitulated with a grim smile, but Hermione wasn't dropping the subject yet.

"Oh, you are not, anyway, Harry," she said gruffly. "But what about teaching? You were wonderful in the D.A. I'm sure Professor McGonagall would appoint you to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts in a heartbeat, N.E.W.T. or no!"

Harry shook his head vigorously. "Absolutely not. No. I'm sick of Dark Arts. I want to get as far away from anything Dark as I can, and never look back."

"But Harry... what a waste! You know so much! You have so much to offer. The whole world would benefit from your--"

Angrily, Harry cut her short. "I believe I've already given the *whole world* more than my fair share! The *whole world* can start looking after itself, I'm done." His voice lowered, though bitterness still burned in it. "And if that makes me sound like a big, selfish git, then so be it. Maybe that's what I am now. I don't know what I am." He paused, cocking his head with unfocused eyes, then added softly, "I'm a murderer."

Hermione reach out to hug him, but stopped short. She glanced at Ron, who shrugged and shook his head. Snape, who had been lurking as usual in the back of the room, opened his mouth to speak, but Harry snapped out of his internal reverie and pointed at him sharply. "And don't you dare make some snide remark about wallowing in self-pity," he said coldly. "You've done plenty yourself, I won't stand for it from you."

Snape closed his mouth, opened it, and closed it again. His expression softened. "Touche'," he said, in barely more than a whisper. "You're right, of course. I wasted my youth sulking. I can only hope you don't make the same mistake, Harry." Hermione and Ron both did double-takes; despite the strange and still-poorly-understood truce between their friend and the Potions professor, they had never heard Snape address Harry by name before.

"What, do you think if you disparage yourself, I'll snap out of it or something?" Harry snarled. "Don't toy with me."

Snape rose up to his full height. "Hark who's talking: 'The darkest wizard alive today.' Please. Do you know what separates dark from light?" In a manner starkly reminiscent of Tura, Snape continued without waiting for an answer. "Many things, obviously; but mainly courage and unselfishness. Those *may* have been diminished when you killed her, but never removed entirely."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a deeply questioning look at the word "her," but said nothing.

Harry clapped his hands over his face, his scar searing in memory of the moment his soul shattered. Snape ignored his obvious pain, taking hold of his wrists and pulling them down, forcing Harry to meet his gaze.

"I'm not talking about the courage to do what had to be done, the hateful and fearful things," he said angrily, then took a deep breath and lowered his voice again. "I'm talking about the courage to move on afterward. To trust again. To open your heart and risk being hurt again." His voice became gravelly, "To believe, when things are at their bleakest, that there is reason to hope--that good can be restored." Snape turned his face away for a moment, to calm the quivering of his lower lip. Looking back at Harry, he said at last, "That brand of courage often eludes me, Harry. But you have it."

They stared at one another for a long time.

"Thank you, Severus," whispered Harry. "But please... let me be for now."

Snape nodded and silently ushered Ron and Hermione out of the drawing room, closing the door with a soft click.

Dust whirled lazily along unseen currents in the shaft of sunlight beaming through the window. Harry recalled the time they had banished a herd of doxies from the curtains of that window, how Fred and George had practically drooled over the eggs. He smiled wanly and sank back into a glum reverie.

He could remember *having* that feeling, as he stood before Voldemort, that crystalline certainty that death did not separate him from the ones he loved. They surrounded him, constantly, permeating every animal, every tree, every blade of grass with wispy tendrils of their love, real, constant, undying. Lily Potter had lain beside her son every night in the darkness of the cupboard under the stairs at number four, Privet Drive, unable to free him, hold him, or even stroke his hair, but her tenderness could sustain his heart through another night. James Potter could not summon a Patronus to save his son or his best friend from a hundred dementors, but when Harry unleashed the magic, James fueled it with his passion and gave it form.

Harry still understood it. But he couldn't *feel* it again. It had become a thought, a memory, clear but dim, and though the knowledge was comforting, it was not satisfying. He missed them. He missed the part of himself that had been torn away. Maybe he would heal, maybe he had not lost that "courage" that Severus had described, but right now... Harry rested his head against the back of the armchair with vacant eyes, doing nothing to stem the tears falling silently onto his collar.

Harry dreamed. He had never seen Northpole in the summertime, but in that way of dreams, he knew he was there. Someone from City Hall wanted help from a Legilimagus. There was a Muggle bush pilot who flew regularly from Kotzebue to Barrow; he had been forced down over Northpole so many times for a memory adjustment that he was nearly mad. Of course Harry would come help if he could.

The pilot's mind was like a Swiss cheese with a termite problem. Different wizards naturally had better, and worse, skill at Obliviation, and unfortunately, several of the latter variety had been assigned recently to modify the pilot's memories. Harry drifted around the pilot's mind for what seemed like hours, coaxing ideas across the gaps to restore a seamless sense of reality, then firmly imprinting a phobia against the compass headings which brought his plane over Northpole.

The witch chaperoning the process had dozed off in her chair by the time he was done, so he took the opportunity to explore. Other passengers from the flight sat in adjacent cubicles, staring dully at the walls, except for one. A team of WIFs were with him; he was some sort of Squib, non-magical except for an uncanny knack for Occlumency. He had resisted all their efforts to Obliviate him. The man worked for an oil company, and was already dreaming of exploiting the ground beneath the city of Northport. There would be no protests in the Muggle world against drilling beneath an Unplottable city which no one even knew existed. The oilman knew plenty of ways to force people off their land, be they wizard or Muggle. Harry knew their attempts to reason with this man were pointless; he would make Northpole a sacrifice to the self-serving god of wealth.

Harry reached into each of the WIF's minds and gently snuffed out their consciousness; they looked almost like dominoes, slumping to sleep in rapid order around the table. The Squib jumped to his feet, his lip already curling into a snarl, his mind already closing off. Had Harry been a sadistic person, he might have laughed, knowing how utterly outmatched this vicious man was, but there was no need to prove his superiority. This was a simple problem and it required only a simple solution.

Harry took hold of the oilman's mind, forcing him to walk down the hall, out of the building, out to the taiga. This was possession, he knew, but it was expedient, and though it might be torture, it would end quickly. Now, even. He took hold of the man's throat to keep him still. "*Avada Kedavra*." The rending again, the ripping of his essence from his body... but this time it went slowly, so slowly, enough that he could reach out and catch his own soul in his hand, as though it were a Snitch.

Harry woke with a start to find Crookshanks draped over him cozily, kneading his chest with his front paws and purring with gusto. "Silly," Harry said affectionately, reaching up to pet Crookshanks' head and finding that the cat met his hand halfway, stretching his neck to gently nudge Harry's palm, as though he meant to pet Harry. Harry rumbled the soft fur between the ears as Crookshanks settled back down, his eyes closed in utter contentment. Even though his blissful expression remained, Crookshanks abruptly stopped purring and began to hiss.

Harry started to shift upwards, fearing an impending hairball and hoping that Crookshanks would keep his claws sheathed until he removed his paws from Harry's chest. The cat suddenly launched itself across his body, bringing his face right to Harry's. Stunned, Harry froze in place and regarded Crookshanks in confusion; he was about to say, "What is it, boy?" when his jaw fell.

As Crookshanks hissed again, Harry could hear language in the sound; the cat was speaking in Parseltongue.

"Hello, falling star."

Snape was using the uppermost bedroom. His home on Spinner's End had been ransacked, first by Aurors searching for clues, then by vandals seeking spiteful vengeance or souvenirs, then most recently by rogue Death Eaters hoping to kill him. He would have to return eventually and straighten up the broken pieces, but for the moment, it was too much to witness the hatred of so many people. He imagined Tura sleeping in this room; she would appreciate the thick velvet curtains, though she probably disliked being so far above solid ground.

Snape scowled when he heard the knock. "Enter," he said listlessly.

Harry nudged the door open with his foot. Crookshanks was both heavy and wriggly, and nearly dashed down the stairs when Harry let go long enough to lift the latch. "I brought you something," he said.

Snape sat up. "I don't like animals, Potter."

"You'll like this one. Come on, girl," he said to the struggling cat, "don't be such a, heh, scaredy-cat." Crookshanks gave Harry a glare that would stop a clock, or at least the heartbeat of a mouse.

Snape glared even harder at the intruders. "For pity's sake, you imbecile, I can tell from over here that cat's a tom."

"Oh, it's no Tom," Harry quipped, even though Snape couldn't possibly appreciate the joke at the moment. He yelped as Crookshanks took a clawed swipe at him, missing his face but connecting sharply with his wrist. Snape swung his legs over the side of the bed with an expression of frank alarm, but before he could get to his feet, Harry lunged across the room and heaved the struggling cat into his lap.

The cat hissed and yowled at Harry, then turned its head to Snape with such chagrin in its eyes, both men instantly thought of the expression, "the cat that ate the canary." Harry smiled and nodded when Crookshanks gave him a final glance. With a little yelping mew, the cat peered at Snape again, then thumped its head against his chin.

Snape sneezed. "Does this have a purpose?" he said in exasperation.

"Ask the cat," said Harry. "Use Legilimency. You won't regret it." Snape stared at him, slackjawed, but he reached for his wand. Harry backed out into the stairway, closing the door firmly as he left. By the time he reached the fifth step, he could hear Severus laughing.

By the time he reached the landing, he could hear Severus crying.

By the time he reached the drawing room, he recalled Sibyl Trelawney's last *real* Prophecy.

The time of midnight sun had come to a close above the Arctic Circle. Geese, loons and swans were anxious to depart with their fledgelings. Foxes, weasels, rabbits and other permanent residents were beginning to molt, new white hairs replacing their dark summer fur. The rivers and the ground would soon be frozen and blanketed with snow. Harry knew he had to find the grave before that happened.

Staying carefully under his invisibility cloak, Harry shook his head at how "spooky" he had become, prowling around cemeteries in the middle of the night, even if there was still a hint of twilight. Grave-robbing, of all things. How *trite*. He couldn't possibly explain his acts to the local Inupiat Muggles; even if he could, they would still consider it an outrageous desecration. Best to keep a low (or invisible) profile and leave them none the wiser.

He and Snape had spent a month preparing for this. It had to be done in absolute secrecy, for this was magic at its Darkest. But the rest of the Wizard world was the least of their problems; more importantly, they had to keep it from Tura. She would frankly have a conniption if she knew what they were up to. Harry ended up recruiting Snuffles to perpetually hassle her, to keep her feline nose out of their business.

"Always knew there was something about that cat," Sirius had said when Harry told him of the situation. "It pulled me out of several scrapes that first year back from Azkaban. So old Crooks had Peter Pettigrew sussed out from day one?"

"Not exactly," Harry said. "She can't seem to do Legilimency while she's, um, embedded in Crookshanks. She's not sure if it's because he's a cat, or because this part of her soul isn't a Legilimagus."

Sirius tipped his head from side to side. "Odd, that. Only she must have suspected something; Crookshanks went after Scabbers with a vengeance at every opportunity."

"Apparently that was all the cat's idea," Harry said with a shrug. "Crooks thought he looked delicious."

Harry had unraveled several mysteries in speaking to the cat. He'd discovered that, for all Tura's intimate knowledge about himself and his history, she'd rarely performed deep Legilimency on him. Instead, she'd learned most of it by reconnecting with Crookshanks, who had witnessed it all firsthand.

"It was a risk I had to take, coming to you," she had explained. "Severus told me about the diary and the Chamber of Secrets--that Dumbledore thought it was a Horcrux. I was afraid he might have made hundreds of them, to be honest. I figured, why should he be the only one with a backup plan? I'm as Slytherin as he was, after all.

"The Horcrux spell itself was top secret, but obviously that wasn't a problem; I just lifted it gradually out of the WIFs every time I went in there. I wasn't quite ready to cast it when the oilman showed up, because I still hadn't figured out what to put my soul in. But it was all for the best, because that mangy cat was the only thing around when I did the split, unless I wanted to put my soul into a pine cone or something. And how could I keep an eye on you as a pine cone? I might have ended up in the bottom of your trunk, if I was lucky enough to get to you at all.

"Crooksy was perfect, though--I could just follow you around. And Herms was so nice to me all the time; I was glad she bought me instead of you. She cuddles better." At that point, Crookshanks' instincts had kicked in and the cat had stalked off his lap, tail high in the air, and curled up for a nap on Hermione.

That was when Harry realized that *this* Tura had never spent a day riding on the back of his broom, nor taken him to the Forbidden Forest to teach him to kill, nor hiked with him across the Siberian wilderness. *This* Tura had never fallen in love with him.

Slinking quietly between the tumuli, Harry spotted a thin wooden cross bearing the name "Ondossi." His heart began to race. He looked for any indication of the first name, but there was none to be found. "Of course," he mused, "poor, alone--whoever buried her did it at their own expense." Harry looked at the grave; it was impossible to judge how old it was, everything in those parts looked weathered and dessicated. He'd have to take a chance.

Harry knelt beside the grave and whispered, "*Cavo Lacunum*" as he slowly twirled his wand above it, carefully keeping the edges of his Invisibility cloak firmly on the ground. The dry, cold earth rose into a neat pile beside the grave. He knew he wouldn't have to dig more than a meter; below that depth, the ground was frozen solid. He kept the diameter of the hole just larger than the width of his hand, to disturb the grave as little he could.

When the pile of dirt seemed big enough, Harry poked the end of his wand into the hole and whispered, "*Lumos*." He'd gone a little too deep; ribs poked out from the earth, but below them, a single vertebra had fallen away from its companions into the shallow pit left by his efforts. "Fair enough," he thought, levitating the displaced bone into his hand before refilling the pit. When he was nearly done, he paused and scraped out a handful of dirt, pocketing it in his robe with the vertebra.

Harry found Severus in the little stone shed that had been Tura's home, peeking out from the curtain over the single south window and looking more pale and anxious than Harry had ever seen. He pulled the door open before Harry could knock.

"Morgan Le Fay, what took you so long?" Snape barked. "The cat's beginning to wake up again. We're going to have to feed and water it if we don't get this done soon--"

"Then stop complaining and let's do it. I have it," Harry said irritably.

Snape's eyes went wide as he beheld the bone Harry pulled from his pocket. "You found it? You're certain?"

Harry screwed up his face. "I hope so. It said 'Ondossi.' I'm guessing that's not a common name."

Snape ran his hands through his hair, grinding his teeth. "We'll only get one chance at this, Harry," he said grimly.

"I know. I brought this too." Harry turned out his pocket to empty the earth from it. "She always talked about the living Land. Maybe if we got the wrong relative, this'll keep it on track."

Snape wrung his hands, looking up at the ceiling. "I can't believe I spent all those years teaching you Potions and you turn up with ingredients like this."

"And I can't believe such the hotshot Potions Master can't make do with what's available!" Harry said crossly.

Snape folded his arms. "Are you quite finished?"

"Are you?"

Snape yanked away the vertebra with a snort and scooped the little pile of dirt into a chipped teacup.

Harry went back to the door and the window, making sure both were closed and covered, as Snape lit a fire below the cauldron on the floor. Crookshanks was indeed starting to wake up, and the bizarre sparks that immediately began crackling on top of the potion did not exactly soothe it back to sleep. Snape was certain that the cat needed to be awake for the process, claws or no. Harry scooped it up with both arms, hoping he could get it in the cauldron while it was still groggy.

No such luck. The jostling woke it enough to take a befuddled glance around, and Tura immediately hissed, "What do you hosers think you're doing? This is my house!"

Shaking his head, Snape raised one hand for silence and pointed sharply to the cauldron with the other. Unfortunately, cats being what they are, his gesture was not unnoticed. As soon as Tura beheld the sparking potion, she turned Crookshanks into a flailing berserker of claws and teeth.

"Hang on! Potter, you let her get away!"

"*Let her?* You try to hold on when she's like that!"

"ARE YOU BOTH OUT OF YOUR MINDS I'LL KILL YOU LEMME GO!" There was truly no language better for screeching than Parseltongue.

"You're positive she has to be awake?" asked Harry for the tenth time.

"Afraid so," said Snape defeatedly.

After a vigorous and painful ten minute romp, in which every large object in the cabin had to be moved at least twice, they finally cornered her behind a bookcase. Snape picked her up and carried her at arm's length to the cauldron as she writhed violently, scratching and biting his arms. "NO! It's too Dark! Don't stain yourselves! Let the Slytherin line die with me..."

Snape dumped her into the cauldron unceremoniously, shoving her head under the surface and wincing as the potion burned his fingers. That ended the protests, and both of them slumped onto the floor for a breather. Snape sneezed a dozen times in a row.

"Do you want to know all the things she said?" asked Harry.

"I'm quite sure I can imagine it," Snape panted

"Was your mother really a--"

"*Enough, Potter.*"

"Do you think Crookshanks will survive this?" Harry asked after a guilty pause.

"Not a chance. The cat was already twelve years old when she made it a Horcrux. It's practically an Inferus now, poor beast. I've been giving it potions for arthritis, renal failure, you name it." Snape glanced wearily at the latticework patterns clawed into his hands and arms, and got to his feet. "We've wasted too much time already, let's get to work."

Harry nodded. He stood beside the cauldron, took a deep breath, and spoke the incantation. "*Bone of the mother, unknowingly given, you will renew your daughter!*"

Snape dropped the vertebra into the cauldron, then with an grimace, slowly poured in the earth of the tundra. The potion turned a vivid blue.

They had decided long ago that for this particular application, the order of the last three ingredients was arbitrary. Snape already had a section of silk in his hand; it was from the robe Harry was wearing when he slayed Voldemort.

"*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe!*" Snape dipped in the fabric, and the cauldron immediately blazed a brilliant red.

Now for the hard part. Harry licked his lips nervously and turned away to rest his left hand hand on the stone countertop. He reached over to the pegboard on the wall where Tura kept her garden tools. The little hatchet was not on its peg. He turned immediately to Snape; sure enough, Severus was holding the hatchet, his own left hand outstretched, though trembling violently.

"She'll go completely spare if you maim yourself for her," said Harry.

"I know," said Snape in a choked voice. "That will be my burden to bear."

"No! I... I killed her, I owe her this."

"She won't see it that way. She just used you as the weapon to kill herself, Potter. Now move away from the counter, I've got to do this before the potion is overdone."

"Your hands are shaking so much you'll probably miss! Just give me the damn hatchet!"

Snape held up the hatchet to prove otherwise, but was surprised to see that Harry was right; the axe was practically a silver blur. He set his jaw and shoved Harry's hand roughly from the counter, then thrust the handle of the hatchet toward him. "All right, you do it, then."

Harry shook his head vehemently. "I'm not cutting off your hand. Move."

"Do you know what she told me?" said Snape. "She loves watching you play Quidditch. You can't play Quidditch with one hand. I, however, can make potions with one hand. So *do it*, already!"

Harry began to shake a little as well. He looked at the hatchet; the blade was extremely sharp, he'd made sure of that when they first arrived. He looked at Severus, who had turned his head, probably thinking that would make it easier for Harry to carry out what had to be done. His hand lay flat and still on the counter. Harry looked at his own left hand. Madam Pomfrey had done her best, but it had not healed properly from Voldemort's impalement; he couldn't move the lateral fingers, and they felt rubbery and numb.

Harry recalled Trelawney's last Prophecy and he knew what to do. He raised the hatchet and took careful aim, then swiftly placed his own hand on top of Snape's. He brought the blade down as hard as he could.

Both men screamed.

"Do you honestly think," panted Snape angrily, "you can brew a successful potion when you make all these substitutions?"

"You're the one that said dried-up old blood would do instead of fresh," gasped Harry, who had sat down on Tura's bed and put his head on his knees to keep from fainting. "Besides," he added with a groan, "something tells me that the more people who suffer, the better, for this particular potion."

"You may have a point," agreed Snape ruefully. "Then let's finish this." Harry couldn't watch, however, as Snape picked up the last "ingredients" from the chopping block.

*"Flesh of the servants, willingly given, you will revive your master!"*

There was a splash, and the potion instantly transformed to a blinding white.

Harry had seen this before, and once was enough. He yanked the pillowcase off a nearby pillow and wound it as tightly as he could around the remaining half of his left hand. It did nothing for the pain, but at least it would stop the bleeding. He'd just finished when the cauldron stopped sparking and erupted into billows of dense white steam, as though the little cabin had been overcome by a giant marshmallow.

This was the moment of truth, then. He leapt to the cauldron, where Snape was already holding his breath.

Someone was in it, facing away from them. Long black hair, pecan-brown skin. She gazed down at her hands, then at the cauldron, and placed them on its rim. She ran her hands over the metal as though trying to find a door through which to climb out.

"Tura?" whispered Snape desperately.

She turned her head. Her eyes were brown and wide with wonder, and upon finding Severus they immediately filled with warmth. But that lasted only a fraction of a second, before her brows began to knit together and the dawn of comprehension began to show in her eyes.

"Severus..." said Harry.

"Run."

The owner of the manor house was up early; winter was fast on its way and he intended to snare a few ptarmigan before the day was done. He stepped out onto his porch, stretching in the brisk morning air, when two men came barreling around the corner of the house as though Death itself were snapping at their heels.

"Wha...?" He didn't even have his wand, it was upstairs on the nightstand. But they didn't seem to be carrying anything off like thieves, and judging by the smiles on their faces, they must have pulled some sort of prank. "Those two are too old for hijinks," he thought reprovingly, as he bent over to pick up his newspaper, the *Wish List*.

A sound resembling a train whistle, right down to the Doppler shifting, blasted around the house. He straightened up in time to see a howling woman charging right through his hedge, naked as the day she was born but armed with a hatchet in one hand and an ancient harpoon tip in the other. She roared after the men right down the middle of the street, leaving dark footprints complete with little toes on the frosty ground.

The old wizard noted that the two men turned the next corner together. He shook his head. They should have separated at that point; she could only follow one of them, and the other could always double back. He watched as she rounded the same corner and hurled the harpoon, listening until it clanked reassuringly on the ground. She was a good aim, but those big steel spears were heavy; she needed her crossbow. Those boys might not be so lucky when she hurled that hatchet.

He called inside to his wife. "Darlene, honey! Did you know Tura's back?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Can you believe there's only one chapter left? I can't. This was one of my favorites, I just love the "Potter dabbling in the Dark" aspect. Not to mention Snape being allergic to cats...

## 49: The Man Who Lived

*Chapter 50 of 50*

Epilogue? What epilogue? I prefer to think of it as the Where Are They Now File.

The valley of Hogsmeade stretched out like a postcard in the summer sun, but the crowd of boys on the hillside took no notice. They had important business: the "Great War: 50th Anniversary Special Edition" Chocolate Frogs had just come out.

"Woohoo! Ron Weasley!"

"I got another Tonks!"

"Trade you a Mad-Eye Moody for it?"

"Dream on!"

"What, you've already got a Tonks!"

"I have the Auror. This one's the WOW card." He held it up to prove his point. She was showing off the latest "World Of Werebeasts" T-shirt, with fluffy purple wolf ears poking from the top of her head.

"Who's still looking for a Hermione Granger?"

"Whoa, check it out! When you hold it this way, it's Sirius Black; tilt it a little and: Snuffles!"

"The Remus Lupin card's supposed to do that too. Hey, anybody got a Hagrid yet?"

There was a general negative murmur among the group, and the tearing of new wrappers. Crunching gravel announced the arrival of a smaller boy, panting from his dash up the hillside. "You guys! Come see this!"

The pack rumbled through the woods to a new vantage point. A crowd of grown-ups were gathered below, which was not particularly unusual in and of itself, but curiously, it comprised more heads of brilliant red hair than any of the boys had ever seen together.

"That's the Weasleys and Sons!" said the oldest, in awestruck tones. "My dad said they're building a huge new 'Wheezes' store here, even bigger than the one in London!" This news produced a hushed reverence.

"But why are they all milling around the Shrieking Shack?"

"Obviously, nitwit, that's where they're going to build the store. They're probably here to tear it down right now!"

"They can't tear it down! My mum says that used to be the most haunted building in England!"

"*Used* to be. Nothing's happened there in, like, a hundred years or something."

"Hey, Hay-Jay! Is that your granddad?"

Turmoil disrupted the ranks of boys as one elbowed his way from somewhere in the middle. "Give over!" He finally reached the front and scrutinized the adults carefully.

"Yeah, that's Papa, all right," said Harry Snape, Jr. "And he's in a right state! There's going to be a row, I bet, but they're lucky; he's been stomping about and growling all week so Nan hid his wand. She always does when he gets like that."

"Looks like he doesn't want them setting up shop."

"Hee hee! He knows he'll never have a minute's peace at Hogwarts again!"

"But what's the difference? They've already got the store in High Street. This one's further away, it'd be even harder to carry things up to the castle without getting caught."

The entire group pondered this mystery for a moment, as Papa (or "the Headmaster," as most of the boys knew him) continued to rail against two of the men, both bald on top with a frame of reddish hair, slightly dulled with gray. They seemed to be laughing at him, which won the respect of every boy on the hillside; only Hay-Jay's gran showed such blatant disregard for Professor Snape's authority in public.

The boys watched for a while, but grew bored as the argument went on and on without advancing either to blows or wands. They began to straggle back to their prior camp, to resume their decimation of the box of Frogs. Soon only the two oldest remained in the trees above the Shrieking Shack. They would be starting their first year at Hogwarts in a month, and therefore had a vested interest in the outcome below. One of them absently unwrapped a Chocolate Frog as he monitored the proceedings. He had eaten nearly the whole frog before it occurred to him to check the card. He gasped.

It was one of the "Limited Edition" Harry Potter cards, the one where he was playing Quidditch in the picture. It was already worth a fortune. The regular cards had a photo of an older wizard whose smile looked kind of sad, but this picture had been taken when Potter had won the World Cup for Scotland, just before he retired from the Hogsmeade Phoenixes and became a Healer. He was neck-and-neck with the opposing Seeker, diving at an insane speed, their robes snapping behind them. Then Potter threw himself into the famous roll, closing his half-hand on the Snitch, righting himself, and pulling his broom out of the dive, all in one fluid movement. Potter threw his head back and the wind whipped all of his wild hair behind him, revealing his face in an expression of pure joy, and on his forehead, the faintest hint of a lightning-bolt scar.

**FINIS**

\* \* \* \* \*

Wow, I can't believe it's all posted. Thanks to everyone who reviewed along the way!