

# The Tortured Soul

by purpleygirl

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own?  
What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to  
find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of  
Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

## What happened to listening at the door?

Chapter 1 of 11

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'...my grief lies all within...

[and] swells with silence in the tortured soul'

... *Richard II*

Harry had been dodging Slytherins for what felt like hours as he waited in the torchlit dungeon corridor. The things he did for his friends. He had caved into Ron's pleas, but he wasn't the only one eager to know whether the rumours were true. Nearly the whole school was buzzing with the idea of Snape leaving.

Making sure the Invisibility Cloak was still securely round him, Harry pressed back into the wall opposite Snape's office as a few people passed. The jagged stone dug into his spine. He checked his breathing underneath the Cloak just as someone nearly lurched right into him. More Slytherins comparing hexes as they went by. Harry was amazed the school's infirmary wasn't clogged up with them every day, if this was their idea of downtime. He jerked forward as an itching jinx glanced off the wall. It bounced away, hit one of the group, and they roared with laughter as their friend scrambled to reach around his back. 'Four to me!' one shouted, and they jostled him, the boy twisting and scratching at his robes and yelling obscenities, as they rolled off in the direction of their common room.

Harry sighed and settled against the wall next to Snape's door. This had better all be worth it. The dungeon was getting colder as the evening drew in, and damper. He was regretting having skipped tonight's Quidditch practice for this. And now another set of Slytherins sounded to be coming down the stone steps. He readied himself and held his breath when he heard Lupin's low voice alongside the deliberate footsteps. *At last.* He tugged the hem of his Cloak tighter around him as Lupin, looking worn, came into view just behind Snape. They drew near.

'Let me make one thing clear, *Lupin*, I am not your *friend* now,' Snape boomed as he unlocked his office with a flick of the wand. 'And I never was,' he said, flinging the door open and striding in.

Lupin stayed in the corridor looking in as though to enter would be entering a battleground unarmed. Harry eyed the distance he was giving the room, inviting him to take the chance Lupin was reluctant to. He couldn't do it, could he? Why not? He glanced in. It would be stupid to listen at the door, he thought as he looked back at Lupin wavering, and end up with only garbled words for his hour of dancing around Slytherins. At the very least it might be less bone-achingly cold and damp in there, and not as

prone to passing hexes. His legs were restless, wanting to move and then Lupin made the decision for him. He turned his hesitance toward the stairs, just for a moment. But it was long enough. Harry edged sideways, slipped around the doorway, and staked his life on the tall glass-fronted cabinet that looked down the room. His heart knocked on the unmoved wood.

Lupin came forward. He closed the door and kept it at his back. Standing only a foot from Harry, he was just as jittery; apparently he hadn't overcome all his doubts. But neither of them had seen Harry, and he released his breath. Now he wouldn't miss a thing.

Snape was a swarm of black robes at his desk. A difficult silence wove its way between them, building a web of three, with Snape at the apex testing it by snatching up parchments and thrusting them down in jagged piles. Harry was the first to give voice as he pleaded in his head, through the fury of pumping blood and shuffling papers, for one of the men to say something.

Then Lupin took a breath. 'Dumbledore told me you...'

'I don't want to hear it,' said Snape, shifting parchment around with greater determination. 'Perhaps now I know I wasn't exactly myself when he fell I may rejoin the Dark Lord after all.'

Harry saw Lupin blanch. 'You ... you don't mean that.'

'Oh? But I have accumulated so much information over the years I dare say he would find some use for it all. It would be the perfect gift for his return and for his very generous act don't you think?

There was a look of exaggerated triumph as Snape glanced up. It seemed to slide away easily on meeting Lupin's pale face, leaving a suggestion of self-disgust. Snape's gaze dropped to the papers in his hands; he tossed them onto the desk and slumped into his chair. 'I don't know what I think any more.'

As though this were his cue, Lupin moved from the doorway and sat opposite him, so that Harry now found himself looking at Lupin's back. 'If you want to talk, I'm here.'

Snape leaned away and swept his eyes over him. 'And that's why you are really here, isn't it? The interfering Headmaster at work again.'

'That's not fair, Severus. He's only trying to help.'

'Trying to cover his back, you mean. He knows if I left Hogwarts he would no longer be able to keep an eye on me.'

'He's worried about you. You're thinking about doing things that could get you into a great deal of trouble. You and I both know Voldemort wants you here, and if you left now ... well, he wouldn't exactly be happy about it, would he?'

'If my well-being had truly been uppermost in Dumbledore's thoughts, he wouldn't have told me any of this in the first place.'

'Perhaps,' Lupin said, with a quiet inflection in his voice that suggested acceptance of Snape's statement.

But it must have shown clearly in Lupin's face, because Snape jumped on it immediately. 'And why are you suddenly concerned?' he said, and raised an eyebrow Harry recognised it as mock surprise.

Lupin said nothing, his back stiffening, indicating he understood Snape's insinuation. After a moment Lupin bent his neck.

So the rumours were true! Harry swallowed carefully around the dryness in his throat, relieved his gamble was paying off. Lupin was at Hogwarts at Dumbledore's request to talk Snape out of leaving. The entire school had been talking about little else for the last few weeks, captivated by the idea of a Snape-free year; but with Voldemort back, Harry knew better: Snape was up to something.

After a few tense minutes of silence, Lupin seemed to believe it better to change the subject. But the new subject was the last one Harry would have chosen. 'I ran into Harry earlier. He told me about recent Potions classes. He doesn't understand why you're ... attacking James more. It's upsetting him.'

Snape snorted.

Harry's stomach lurched at Lupin's betrayal. It would make Snape's day to think he had got to him. Harry had no choice but to listen with a sick feeling as Lupin ploughed on. 'He doesn't understand, Severus. If you told him, then...'

'Tell him! Are you out of your mind?'

'It would make things easier...'

'For whom?'

'For both of you...'

'Plainly you have not thought this through.' Snape leaned forward so that he was staring Lupin in the face. 'Do you really think Potter would be pleased to know? That either of us would find our lives here easier? Think, Lupin.'

'He would need time, but... You can't keep this from him, not forever.'

Snape straightened. 'I can and I will. Harry Potter shall never know. His knowledge of this would achieve nothing.' He turned his head. 'And I could not bear the way he would look at me if he knew.' For a moment he stared at a spot on the wall as though his downfall could be read in it; he snapped his gaze away and sat back. 'Dumbledore has already sworn to me Potter shall never hear it from him,' he said with renewed confidence. 'And the few others who know ... apparently it is inconsequential to them they've most likely dismissed it already. Minerva does not know. Neither does Black. At least Dumbledore had the foresight for that. And you ... now you know.' His glare became suspicious, challenging. 'But Potter shall never learn of it.'

'I won't go over your head about this. Harry won't hear it from me either. I appreciate it's your decision to make.'

'Good.'

'But pretending it never happened won't make it go away. Every time you see Harry...'

Snape groaned and dragged a hand through his greasy hair as though the sight of Harry was so offensive that he sought to rid himself of even the thought of it.

'But you can't leave Hogwarts,' said Lupin. 'You and I both know that. Not with Voldemort returned these last few months and Dumbledore reforming the Order of the Phoenix.' He ignored Snape's scowl. 'We all have a lot of work to do we need to convince the Ministry to believe us when we say Voldemort has returned, for one thing. So the sensible thing would be to get this out of the way between you. Harry will understand in time.'

Snape's blazing distrust was not as easy for Lupin to ignore.

'I won't say anything. You know that. It's up to you.'

Snape's suspicion twisted into anger. 'So how do you suggest I should put it? Something like, "Ah, Potter?"' He turned and looked beyond Lupin at some imagined Harry,

luckily standing at the other side of the door. "By the way," he said lightly to the other Harry, who took his matching dislike in stubborn silence, "your father James did not really die after all..."

It was Harry's racing heart that first heard the words; it hammered for his attention. Adrenalin nipped the back of his throat as he saw Lupin's hands fly to the arms of his chair. 'Well, with a little more tact than that, perhaps,' said Lupin in a broken voice.

'Tact?' Snape looked disgusted. 'All the more reason why he is not to know, don't you think? Ever,' he added, punctuating the word by leaning back in his chair with a creak.

Harry's head swam as the words sank in. *Your father James did not really die after all.* He heard them over and over, his reasoning trying to find the explanation, the loophole in them. But there was none; though Snape had said them in obvious mockery to an imagined Harry, they seemed to be meant. Lupin's reaction said they were true.

And Snape had sworn he would never know.

Harry tried to steady his breaths. He had to calm down. If they found out he was there if Snape was so determined for him not to know about this who knew what he would do. The worst he could do was take the knowledge back somehow, with some horrible spell, make Harry carry on thinking his dad was dead... But he wasn't! His dad was alive! He wanted to shout it out. He felt like he had just made the greatest discovery in the world right here, right underneath his own father's Invisibility Cloak. And though that world had just expanded unimaginably, it now seemed to hang over a precipice.

He squeezed his eyes to shut out the room, and with a burst of fear stopped himself just in time from leaning on the cabinet. He focused on calming his excited breaths so they wouldn't give him away. What a stupid idea it had been, sneaking in here, right past Lupin. But then he would never have heard. His heart thumped again. His dad was alive but he felt he didn't yet own this knowledge not until he was free and far away from Snape.

He opened his eyes. Still sat at his desk, Snape was now bent over it, head in one hand. '...running out of Dreamless Sleeping Potion,' he heard Snape say. 'That blasted Headmaster,' Snape spat. 'Why? Why did he have to tell me? What good does it do?'

'Perhaps it may have been better if ... if he hadn't.'

'Fourteen years fourteen years I've been carrying it without my knowledge. Carrying it at no cost. And now Dumbledore seeks to change that.'

'He doesn't want to change anything he just wanted you to know the truth. You know how he is.'

'Maybe I shall cast a Memory Charm on myself.'

'Severus it was only discovered a few weeks ago. It will get better, trust me.'

'Oh and you would know?'

'When I was bitten...'

Snape made a derisive noise. 'I hardly think turning into a werewolf each month is comparable with...'

'I have had to get used to being something I ought not to be because of the actions of one man,' said Lupin in a firm voice.

They seemed to try to outstare one another, then Snape looked away. 'I have classes to prepare for.'

Harry heard Lupin sigh and saw him move to rise from his chair. He got up slowly, heavily, as though he had been on his feet all day and was in need of a rest, and Harry began inching his way toward the door, bracing himself to slip out as soon as the first opportunity arose.

Snape was glaring at a shelf. 'Dumbledore thinks I'm to make the Wolfsbane Potion for you,' he said as Lupin pulled the door ajar. 'But there isn't a full moon for another ten days I'm sure you know. You've had a wasted journey.'

Lupin had turned his face, so that Harry saw how far he seemed to have sunk within himself; he had never seen him look so tired. 'That's not why I'm here...'

'I *know*.' Snape closed his eyes and let out an irritated sigh. 'Would that there were a similar potion I could take,' he said, and he produced a horrible, strangled noise in his throat.

Lupin opened his mouth, but seemed lost. As Harry edged his way out of the room, he glimpsed his curious expression: a kind of fearful concern. 'We'll talk again soon, perhaps?' he said. Harry didn't catch Snape's reply.

Flat against the wall by the door, he felt the reverberation as Lupin closed it and then watched him depart down the corridor. He listened, rapt, to the thrumming in his chest as the echoes of Lupin's footsteps faded. He was aware his back was damp he was leaning against the dungeon wall but couldn't be certain whether it was simply the lake water leaching through.

It took several moments to persuade his feet to return him down the familiar route to Gryffindor Tower. It was only then he dared hear his own voice whisper to the empty common room: 'My dad's *alive*.'

-X-

The night was excruciating. It had been later than he'd thought when he'd got back to the dormitory; Ron was already in bed, and he'd nearly tripped over his muddy Quidditch kit. He couldn't rouse him enough to persuade him to the privacy of the common room, and Harry didn't get a wink of sleep. But he must have nodded off before morning came, because the sun was shining on Ron's empty pillow, and Harry faced another tortuous wait as he hurried down to the Great Hall.

He found him down the far end of the Gryffindor table. It was busy; he took the seat next to Hermione, but she was deep in conversation with Parvati Patil. Ron, opposite, was listening to Dean while chomping toast. Harry didn't feel like eating, though he poured a goblet of pumpkin juice and found he was thirstier than he thought.

Parvati was getting up to leave, and Hermione turned to him. She paused his sleepless night must have been showing. 'Are you all right?' she said.

'We need to talk,' he whispered.

She looked solemn, and glanced at Ron, who was busily obeying the demands of his appetite after last night's Quidditch practice. 'Is this about yesterday?' she asked, leaning toward him so the others wouldn't hear. 'What did you find out?'

'Not here.'

She watched as he poured himself another pumpkin juice. 'Aren't you eating anything?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'So, Harry how'd it go?'

He looked up from his goblet at Dean Ron, chewing less eagerly, had also turned his attention his way. 'What?' said Harry distractedly, his thoughts on getting Ron and Hermione somewhere quiet so he could share his news.

'Last night did you find anything out about Snape...' Dean glanced up at the High Table, but Snape wasn't there. 'Is he leaving, or what?'

'Yeah,' put in Seamus, 'I heard Lupin's here, isn't he?'

'Harry said Dumbledore called Lupin here yesterday,' said Dean, sounding pleased to know more about it than Seamus. 'He saw him arrive and he heard Dumbledore ask him to help talk Snape out of leaving, didn't you?'

It felt like a hundred years ago to Harry. 'Yeah I mean Lupin's not staying, he's just visiting for the Wolfsbane Potion and Snape's not leaving.'

'Ah, for ...' Ron swallowed the last of his breakfast. 'Well, that's just great, isn't it?' He sat back and fingered his left arm through his robes. Harry knew what was coming next. Dean also seemed to know. He was already looking down at his plate to hide the smirk. 'Dumbledore's got a lot to answer for. So's Lupin.' Ron shook his head, then finally pushed up his sleeve and announced, 'Still there.' Dean focused on slowly refilling his goblet.

'It's just a freckle, Ron,' said Hermione with the same sort of patience Harry often heard from Molly Weasley when talking to one of her children.

Ron's face went red, as though his very freckles were outraged by her dismissal. 'It's not just a freckle. It's a bruise, anyone can see that. All right maybe it's gone down a bit since the git grabbed me. But the evidence is there. Can't deny what he did.'

'No, I'm not. Of course I'm not. He hasn't been nice to anyone lately...' Dean sent her a look of incredulity, perhaps wondering when Snape had ever been nice. 'Look,' she pressed on, 'maybe Professor Snape will be back to normal now after talking to Lupin, about ' she glanced at Harry, obviously curious about his desire to talk privately ' whatever.'

'Normal? Fantastic,' said Ron. 'Looking forward to that.'

Hermione gave him a look. 'He's been worse to Harry worse than usual. Gryffindor's never lost so many points so early in the year before. It's been awful for everyone. So let's hope things change,' she said, turning to Harry.

He hoped so too. He couldn't bear the thought of the rest of the year's Potions classes being just the same Snape zoning in on him right from the start, bursts of anger over the smallest of mistakes made worse of course because of his efforts to get it right and avoid these clashes followed by extended tirades about how much he resembled his big-headed, lazy, foolhardy father. Ron had lost his temper last week and earned a swift exit for his mumbled 'git'.

But it would be so much harder now he knew that ... that his dad was alive.

His head felt light just thinking it. He needed to find a quiet moment so he could tell Ron and Hermione. But the table was already clearing, showing a line of miserable faces as the bad news sank in: the rumours about Snape leaving Hogwarts had finally been quashed.

'Well,' said Hermione when they were at last outside. Harry led them to a nearby tree, the early November wind whipping about their robes as they walked. 'I think it's probably a good thing Professor Snape's not leaving not with You-Know-Who back.'

'Says you,' said Ron, slumping against the wide trunk of the tree as it threw down a brown leaf onto the mottled grass at their feet.

'My dad's alive.'

They both turned to him.

'I heard Snape say it,' he said to their blank faces, 'inside his office to Lupin.'

'You were *inside* Snape's office?' Ron straightened up, and Harry felt somewhat annoyed that it was this that had got his attention. 'That's brilliant. How'd you manage it?'

'But your dad?' Hermione was studying him. 'How...?'

'I don't know how. I just know it's true.' His mind went back to last night. 'D'you think they've known all along?'

'But wait what happened, what did Snape say exactly?'

He heard Snape's mocking words again. 'He said, "Oh, Potter, your father James didn't really die after all".' He couldn't help repeating them with something of Snape's unique bitterness.

'I don't get it,' said Ron. 'He saw you?'

'He was pretending I was there, taunting me he kept saying to Lupin over and over that he'd never tell me, making him promise not to as well. What's Snape got to do with this anyway?'

'But, Harry,' said Hermione, showing none of Harry's desperation, only a quiet concern. 'How can your dad really be alive after all this time?' Her voice lowered to a hush. 'They found his body.'

'I don't know. All I know is Dumbledore and Lupin swore they'd never tell anyone including me. And everyone else thinks he's dead.' Since last night, Harry had been floating on the excitement of all the possibilities that had opened themselves up to him. But now that excitement gave way to worry, and anger why had this been kept from him?

'It just seems so *unlikely*.'

'I heard him say it! They're keeping it from everyone!'

'But why would they...?'

'I don't know! Why don't you ask them!'

'So where is he, then?' asked Ron. 'Your dad? If he is alive,' he added at Hermione's sharp look.

Harry thought through what he'd heard. But there was nothing. 'They didn't say anything. But Snape's got a hold over everyone. He knows something.' He felt a chill of worry. 'If Snape's at the centre of this somehow ... he hates him, he can't stand the thought of him being alive...' His mind spun; he had never felt so frustrated.

'Harry, please, we have to think about this rationally,' said Hermione, and Harry could hardly understand how she could stay so calm. 'What about what you saw this summer? When You-Know-Who... The Priori Incantatem?'

'Oh, that. Well, there's got to be some other explanation for that, hasn't there?'

She didn't offer any. 'What happened to listening at Snape's door?' she said.

'Good thing I didn't, or I might never have heard.'

'But you were taking a risk... What on earth made you go inside?'

'I dunno, I just did.' He was getting nowhere with these questions. 'But I'm glad, or I wouldn't have found out my dad's alive.' He thought he would never tire of saying those three words, and the thrill they sent; it cut through his anger, and he kneaded his head around his prickling scar. 'Aren't you? Aren't you glad I did?'

'We are,' Hermione said, and she made an effort, her face opening a little to reflect some of his joy. 'Of course we are. But if... what Snape said is true...'

'It is! He said it!'

'All right, but... then we need to find out where he is, don't we?'

'Maybe your mum's alive too?' said Ron, his eyes wide with some of Harry's hope.

But Harry had already considered this wonderful possibility last night as he had thought of what he had seen in the Mirror of Erised. 'It's her blood magic protects me,' he said, and he was cast down all over again, descending with the loss of something he had never had. 'She must have died. It was her death that saved me from Voldemort's Killing Curse.' With the promise that one half of his greatest desire would soon be fulfilled, he had naturally wanted the other half with it but he had only succeeded in earning a sharp kick of guilt at his unreasonable greed.

They stood in silence. Classes would be starting soon, but Harry was in no hurry to go back inside; the twisting breeze matched his restless thoughts. 'D'you think,' said Hermione after a moment, 'it's something something to do with You-Know-Who?'

'How d'you mean?'

'Well, I was just thinking... the timing... with You-Know-Who coming back and the Order of the Phoenix reforming, now Snape saying this...'

'You think Voldemort's got him?'

'What?'

She was shocked, but it made perfect sense to Harry. Why else would Snape know about this? 'Snape said he wished Dumbledore hadn't told him something. Maybe Dumbledore found something out and then forced the truth out of him. They made it look like he'd died that's got to be it. Snape and Voldemort. And then... What if he was tortured like Neville's parents? What if he's in St Mungo's and no one knows who he is? What if he's in Azkaban Snape'd love to put him there, like Sirius. Or some Death Eaters are holding him...?'

'Harry!' cried Hermione desperately. 'Even if even if Snape knew about it, it doesn't mean he's in trouble.'

'If my dad was all right, he'd have tried to contact me, wouldn't he?'

'Well... but if Dumbledore knows, and Lupin, then they wouldn't let anything bad happen to him.'

'But they only know *now*. Snape's just told them *now*, because Dumbledore made him. And why won't Snape let them tell anyone else? Why doesn't he want me to know? Don't you see? Snape's got everyone wrapped round his little finger.' An image of the greasy-haired professor sneering with satisfaction at having kept the truth from him swam into his mind. He had imagined him drowning in his own cauldron often enough, but right now he would give all his gold from Gringotts to see it for real. 'And Dumbledore trusts him!' He clenched his teeth. 'I hate him.'

'Yeah, me and you both, mate,' said Ron. 'You've got to see someone about this. Dumbledore or Lupin. Never mind Snape they've got to tell you he's your *dad*.'

Harry shook his head. 'They won't, I know it. Snape's convinced them all my dad'll be safe as long as no one else knows the truth.' He had a terrifying thought. 'Maybe they're scared of what Snape'll do to him.'

'Look, Ron's right,' said Hermione. 'You've got to find out what's really going on. It's going to eat you alive if you don't. I'm sure your dad's okay but you'll just carry on thinking the worst unless you find out.'

'But how?' He lifted his shoulders in defeat. 'And what if something really bad happens to him when they find out I know?' He looked to the castle and shook his head. 'If he hasn't tried to contact me in all these years, then what can I do? I can't risk doing any more sneaking or searching around. I might just end up getting him into even more trouble.'

Ron and Hermione traded looks of anxiety as they stood in contemplative silence. Harry's powerlessness to help his father left him with a hollow feeling deep inside, as though something had been gouged out from his belly. He wondered if this was what it felt like to worry for a parent, to grieve for a parent. His head was still light from lack of proper sleep, thoughts teeming freely, refusing to obey his weary need to know the truth. All the increased taunting from Snape over the past weeks made sense now he must have been furious when Dumbledore had forced him to come clean on what he knew about James.

But Harry wasn't going to stand by and do nothing he swore he would find a way to make sure his father was safe; he would not allow Snape to continue keeping the truth from him. Whatever it took.

-x-

It was the first time Snape had been in Dumbledore's office since discovering in this room what had happened to James Potter. He glanced at the cabinet where *was it just sixteen days ago? It felt longer* Dumbledore had brought out the two glass jars containing samples of magic, one of which was his. Except that it wasn't.

'Did you see Remus?'

Snape turned to Dumbledore, sat at his desk, eyes moving over a parchment from a pile in front of him.

'Oh, yes, Dumbledore. Indeed.'

'Excellent. It's kind of you to agree to make the Wolfsbane Potion again for a while. I hope he'll suffer less.'

Snape set his mouth; he was in no mood to humour him in his schemes. What had the meddling Headmaster imagined, bringing the werewolf here? He could not think of James Potter and Remus Lupin together without seeing Lupin's turned head on the perimeters of Black and Potter's attacks. It was an association fixed in eternity. The werewolf's presence only served to remind him of why he poured hatred on his memories of James Potter, the man who had played with lives to massage his already overblown ego. With jaw fixed, he watched Dumbledore set aside the raft of parchments.

'And have you had the chance to reconsider your position here?'

Snape scowled freely. Dumbledore knew he had not been serious about leaving the school. He had wanted to be rid once and for all of the boy who had his father's face... But he had not been thinking straight. Perhaps he should have demanded the Defence Against the Dark Arts job in return for staying. 'As you well know, I cannot leave with the Dark Lord now risen again. He expects me to remain here as spy.'

'Well, of course. Good.'

Snape scanned the portraits on the walls most were in some other picture or napping in their painted chairs, just as they had been two weeks ago. It was extraordinary how much they managed to sleep through in this office. It had been just beneath the empty frame of Phineas Nigellus that Dumbledore had shown him his little test. Fawkes on his nearby perch had flapped his wings, disturbing the dusty air, as Dumbledore had first set down onto the cabinet the results he had gleaned from the secret test he'd done earlier. Done on Snape's own magic what he had thought was his own.

'I expect you called me here for a reason?' said Snape, turning back to Dumbledore, who had put out a hand towards an open box of sherbet lemons. 'Perhaps another revelation have you discovered some other piece of me that is not mine?'

Dumbledore's fingers glided higher to the lid and brought it closed. He folded his hands and gave him his attention. 'I'm sure the rest of you is firmly yours, Severus. No, I do wish to ask something of you. But I will get to that. First, you how are you feeling?'

'I have never felt better. There is nothing quite like discovering one's soul is not one's own but that of a person one loathed.'

Dumbledore gave a little cough, to Snape's satisfaction. 'You know it will take time.' But it seemed the topic of Snape's welfare was a brief one. 'Yes,' said Dumbledore with sudden gravity, signalling a return to the previous subject, 'we must be vigilant with Lord Voldemort among us again.'

'Vigilant yes. We must avoid occurrences like last year with the Mad-Eye Moody that wasn't, mustn't we? Such as by taking samples of the staff's magic for the school records?'

Dumbledore refused to look away. 'You know I had to be sure. Would you have wanted to go through the test without my being certain of the result first?'

'I thought the Death Eater who'd witnessed it all had confirmed it under Veritaserum?'

'Yes, he did.' Dumbledore sighed and removed his glasses. He gazed at them for a moment, before putting them back on. 'I am sorry for misleading you on the purpose of the sample. But not for informing you of the truth.'

'Really? I still don't see what good it does, my knowing. Nor, indeed, what difference any of this makes.'

'It is the truth and I find the truth has a habit of coming out sooner or later usually under worse circumstances.'

'Do you still have it in there? Your little test?'

Dumbledore's silence said it all.

'Maybe in case I have doubts? Then why not put our minds to rest and run it again?'

'There is no need...'

'Oh, but I insist.' Snape rose so he no longer had to see the disinterest in Dumbledore's surprise. He strode to the cabinet and opened it without waiting to hear his reply. There they still were, at the edge of the second shelf. 'What do you say, Dumbledore,' he said, turning with his hand on the door, 'fourth time lucky?'

Silence for a moment. Then: 'Very well,' and he moved his chair back, his face stolid, and beneath it Snape knew he was finally taking him seriously. 'If you are certain you want it. But after this no more.'

It was a simple thing, taking a sample from a wizard's magical core, though Snape had never witnessed it being done before last month. There was little use for it unlike containing someone's memory in the hopes of obtaining valuable information, having a sample of someone's magic merely meant one had his magical signature on hand, should it be needed. Such as for a test.

Now he had Dumbledore's full attention, Snape felt little enthusiasm for repeating this thing. But Dumbledore was taking out one of the bottles, leaving behind the other, which bore his name on the glass *an irony indeed* and setting it on top of the cabinet just as he had done two weeks ago. And just as then the portrait above that normally contained Phineas Nigellus looked down vacantly. Snape got out his wand and pointed it a foot above the bottle.

Dumbledore checked Snape was ready, and touched the stopper. As soon as it was removed, the magic crept out, its yellowish hue, faint from being spread out greedily in the bottle little was left of it now since their previous three tests, and Dumbledore's secret one before that deepened in colour as it conspired at the neck.

'*Subscriptio*.' From Snape's wand issued a matching gold, its thin strand breaking free. It floated forward and down, inching closer. It seemed to take an age, then as now.

In days past it might have curled around a roll of parchment a more reliable seal for important documents than the Muggles' use of candle wax or leave a stain of gold the family gold beneath an inked signature.

But today the strands found no paper targets. Instead, as though sensing a fellow wanderer, their movements changed, at first subtly.

Unlike strands would repel, as though nobles of different houses racing past one another in joust, sparks flying where violent contact was made.

But not today. Today they recognised a member of the same paternal house the Potter house. They greeted with strong embraces. The threads of magic wound around one another as they passed, weaving together with increasing speed, with an eagerness that was almost obscene at one another's touch, curving upward under the combined momentum, until they were a single golden cord rising to the ceiling victorious. The Potter line, united.

Snape replaced his wand and let Dumbledore deal with clearing it all away. He retook his seat and waited. A moment later, after the soft thud of the cabinet door, Dumbledore was back behind his desk. 'So, you said you wanted to ask something of me?'

Dumbledore did not answer straight away. 'Yes,' he said, seeming to consider the question. 'The Ministry is still denying Lord Voldemort's return.'

'What more is there to be done?'

'I'm sure something will come up. But there's been something...' He paused, then looked across at a table on which was a wind-up clock that appeared to have stopped and several silver instruments whirring softly. 'I'm late for my meeting with Fudge.'

'He's been expecting you?'

'No.' Dumbledore smiled and rose. 'Walk with me downstairs?' Snape followed as he retrieved his travelling cloak from the stand. When they were in the corridor, moving out of sight of the gargoyle, he said, 'Harry's scar has recently been hurting him more. Since Voldemort's return, in fact.'

'Really?' For Potter there was now the threat of losing all the attention he had carefully built up over the years. If the Dark Lord were revealed, all eyes would move to him, and Potter would find no one to pay heed to his sulking.

'It's more than coincidence. There is something behind it ... a change in him. I fear Voldemort has already begun seeking to influence him through their link.'

'The Dark Lord has better things to do with his time.'

'Perhaps. But perhaps he doesn't quite share your certainty.' They came to a stop at the head of the marble staircase. The entrance hall below was empty, and silent but for the sound of distant footsteps as someone moved from one room to another. Most of the students were back in their respective common rooms after dinner. Dumbledore turned to him. 'Which is why I wish you to teach Harry Occlumency.'

'What? Me?'

'Perhaps you could begin as soon as possible?'

'Yes, why not now? I'm sure I'd like to see what pudding he had tonight. On the floor as well as in his head.' He hunted through Dumbledore's framed expression for the sign he was merely being played with. 'I see the value in it. That is, if Potter has the capacity. Which he won't, given his mediocrity in everything else. But if you think it wise to try it wouldn't the boy learn better with you as his instructor?'

'I've noticed in him certain feelings of aggression toward me, something within him seeking an opportunity to attack.'

Snape could hardly blame the boy for that. He had felt much the same since Dumbledore had told him the fate of Potter senior.

'I fear Voldemort is behind it. It means there is little chance of him learning anything useful from me. Which is why you would be the better teacher. In addition to your excellent skills in the art, of course.'

Snape ignored the strategically placed praise and the amiable smile accompanying it, his mind instead working in search of a reason to get out of teaching the Potter brat. 'Dumbledore. With what has recently transpired ... Potter's father ... it would create difficulties surely you see that?'

'Harry is not James.'

There were no words for this. Snape could feel a headache coming on but better that intractable heat than the cool arrangement of thoughts that would spell out the inference that followed from Dumbledore's simple statement.

'Good,' Dumbledore said before Snape had time to think further. 'So do please inform the boy when his first lesson will be.' He turned and seemed to spring down the stairs as though he'd just remembered where he'd put a favourite pair of socks, cheerily greeting a passing student. Snape seethed at the girl, and wondered whether it would not be preferable to reconsider his position at Hogwarts, and risk the Dark Lord's wrath after all.

## Restored to life

### *Chapter 2 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

'Hey, Harry.' Neville leaned across the Gryffindor table with a skewered sausage on his fork. 'You going to the library tonight to do some OWL studying?'

'Erm, no, I can't. I've got, um ... to see Snape.' Harry kept his eyes on his plate.

'What for?' Neville took a bite. 'You didn't get detention again?'

'Um ... no. I've got, er...' He glanced along the table. 'I've got remedial Potions,' Harry whispered.

Neville stopped chewing. His eyes widened with wonder and Harry thought unease. 'Boy, I didn't know you were that bad.'

Harry felt horrible he couldn't tell him the real reason for his extra lessons with Snape. Neville was picking at his food worriedly. Since it was him who ruined the most potions on a regular basis, Harry imagined he must be terrified Snape might decide he also needed one-on-one Potions tuition. Neville would probably have nightmares for weeks.

He forced down his guilty sympathy and stuffed his mouth with potato. He had only told Ron and Hermione the extra tuition was to teach him Occlumency. He didn't want to tempt Snape's fury. Those private lessons were bad enough as they were.

He'd had three over the last couple of weeks, but it wasn't getting any easier to clear his mind. The overwhelming distrust he now felt around Snape wasn't nearly as comforting as the hate he'd nurtured for him over the years. Just the thought, never mind the sight, of Snape triggered visions of the horrific things his dad might be going through, the dreadful places he was being held against his will, and images of him lying in a hospital bed somewhere not knowing he had a son, or even who he was himself.

He did his best to push them away. Snape was relentless in rifling through his memories. It was as if he was deliberately not telling him how to do this Occlumency thing properly. Watching Snape view every personal and private thing, both with the Dursleys and at Hogwarts, then enduring his ugly sneers, was humiliating. But it would be a disaster if he found out he knew his dad was alive. He might never see him again.

He saved up until night his daydreams about seeing his dad. Bedtime usually began with a brief period of irritation when he remembered Snape's instruction he clear his mind before sleep and then he put thoughts of Snape aside for better things.

Now Dumbledore and Lupin had found out the truth, they would make sure his dad was safe and well, he was certain of it. And they would find a way for him to make contact with his son.

He had never really known his father. He only had the still-new feeling instilled by Sirius to go on when it came to family. But that was surely nothing compared to what it would be like when he and his dad were finally reunited. He could barely imagine it.

Still, he tried to, every night. And he would until the day it became real.

But in the meantime he had the continued mental torture of private lessons with Snape.

'I feel sick at the end of every session,' he told Hermione between classes when she asked how his Occlumency was going.

'Well, you've only had them for a few weeks,' she said. 'And you should practise like Professor Snape tells you to.'

'It's not that. It's with all the tension of knowing he knows exactly where my dad is and trying to keep those kinds of thoughts out of my head in case he sees them. And they're just like Potions classes every time he takes a stab at me or my dad, I just want to throttle the truth out of him.'

If he could practise drifting off to sleep with a clear mind, maybe he would find it easier to shove Snape from his head during those lessons; but he could as much let go of his fantasies about his dad as he could his hate for Snape.

Still, the odd thing was, though he fell asleep dreaming of such things as standing with his dad cheering on the Chudley Cannons, he sometimes woke to very different visions.

'I've been having these weird dreams recently,' he told Hermione as they walked across the grounds to Care of Magical Creatures, 'where I'm in a really creepy place like a house.' He hung his head in thought. 'It's strange, because in my last lesson with Snape, I cast a Shielding Charm when he used Legilimency and I actually broke into his thoughts for a second. Maybe that's what that place is all about what if those dreams are something to do with the Legilimency he's doing on me? Maybe it's where my dad is.' He let out a frustrated breath. 'If only I knew where it was.'

'Sounds a bit too vague to me,' she said, her brows furrowed. 'And it's not like you actually saw your dad in his thoughts, did you?'

The only person he had seen in Snape's head he had recognised had been the strange little boy who had cried as his parents argued.

'So you don't know that's where he is,' said Hermione. 'I mean, you're trying your best not to think about your dad when Snape's looking at your thoughts that'll be what he's doing too.'

'Yeah, I suppose. He puts some of his memories in Dumbledore's Pensieve before every lesson so I can't see them. I'll bet at least one's about where my dad is...' He stopped, thinking furiously. He was mad at himself for not considering this before.

'I don't think I'm going to like this somehow,' said Hermione, pulling back to where he stood in contemplation.

'If I can get Snape out of his office in tonight's lesson...' He pictured his plan. 'It'll give me the chance to take a quick look in the Pensieve at one of his memories.'

'You don't know for sure he put...'

'Hermione, one's bound to be about my dad Snape'll do anything to stop me finding something out.'

'Well...'

Though she looked uncertain, Harry wasn't going to let her give up so easily. With Lupin and Dumbledore apparently sworn to secrecy, this could be the only way to find out where his father was. 'So, if you and Ron can create a diversion tonight...'

'Oh...'

'Please, Hermione?'

'Well... You know you'd have to be really quick? I mean, Snape's bound to be suspicious of you, isn't he?' She hesitated, taking a moment to study him with concern, then sighed. 'I'll think of something,' she promised reluctantly.

He grinned in relief. 'Thanks, Hermione.'

That evening he found himself once again on the dusty floor of Snape's office, thinking he was getting rather familiar with the stains there and their various shades of black from years of potions and who knew what else.

'That dog again? Get up, Potter. Let's start over.'

His head spinning, Harry tried to focus on where the ground was beneath his hands. 'I need a break,' he said hoarsely as he heaved himself up.

'Funny, I don't believe the Dark Lord allows for tea breaks.' Snape pointed his wand as Harry got to his feet. 'One ... two...'

'Stop!' Snape and his wand were swaying. That really wasn't normal.

'Extraordinary.' Snape lowered his arm as Harry leaned on a nearby chair. 'All those years of training my mind from intrusion, when a simple demand for a reprieve would do. Why didn't I think of that before I could have saved myself years of time and effort.'

Harry dug his fingers into the back of the chair and glared at Snape while his wand was still down.

'Why don't you just admit it, Potter? You are not practising like I told you to! I would have thought emptying your mind would have been an easy task you're always at least halfway there already in my classes.'

'I'm trying,' Harry said through gritted teeth.

Snape sneered. 'Yes, you are very trying.'

He was raising his wand again, and Harry hurriedly pushed out all thoughts on what Snape might know about his dad's whereabouts and forced himself to focus instead on the Dursleys. Maybe he was overdoing Aunt Marge's dog. It was just easier to concentrate on such a reliable event that didn't feature a Dursley directly. But it wasn't as if he had a shortage of other memories Snape would be satisfied with. Dudley making him stand in the toilet, the spiders in his cupboard... He broke out in another sweat, his heart pounding as he met Snape's sour gaze.

'Let's hope for your sake I don't see the dog again, Potter. After three...'

Before he could start counting down, the door burst open, spilling the bulky form of Crabbe into the room.

'Sir,' he said around quick, rasping breaths, 'Draco.' Crabbe, who hadn't noticed Harry, and was a person of few words at the best of times, appeared about to dash out again before he'd explained what the matter was.

But Snape didn't seem particularly worried. He looked more inconvenienced than anything else. 'Potter.' He turned stern black eyes to Harry. 'We shall resume from this point next lesson.'

As Crabbe darted out into the corridor, Snape added quietly but forcefully, 'And make sure you practise clearing your mind!' At that, he turned and followed Crabbe, dark robes billowing.

Harry slid to the doorway and listened to Snape's echoing voice probing Crabbe as their footsteps receded down the corridor.

Turning to look at the soft shimmer on Snape's desk, he hoped this was the diversion Hermione had promised him. He carefully closed the door and took a decisive step

toward the Pensieve, its contents summoning him like a beacon in the murky dungeon.

-X-

It was Hermione who spotted him first as he entered the library afterwards. She placed her book down on the table and fixed a questioning look on him as he drew a seat next to Ron, slumped behind a Quidditch manual. 'Well?' she asked.

Ron straightened as he sank into the chair. Both quickly caught on to his disappointment. 'You didn't see your dad?' said Ron.

'I saw him,' said Harry, not feeling ready yet to meet his or Hermione's concerned gaze.

'And?' pressed Ron.

Harry shrugged. 'He'd just finished his Defence Against the Dark Arts OWL exam.'

Ron's expression twisted into one of confusion, but Hermione seemed to understand. 'You saw him when he was at Hogwarts?' she asked.

He nodded, still refusing to look either in the eye. What he had seen hadn't been what he had expected. Not at all. He still didn't know what to make of it, ten minutes after he had exited Snape's memory and office unseen.

'So you're still none the wiser,' stated Ron.

Harry sighed; he hadn't been able to see anything that could have given him the remotest idea of where his dad was. Once in Snape's memory, he had been transfixed with being so near to his dad amazed he had looked so much like him when he had been his age and seeing him with Sirius, Lupin and even with a young Wormtail. And his mum, with her auburn hair caught by the summer's breeze, facing off to his father by the lake's edge. 'I only had time to see one memory. Didn't see that house.'

'What house?' asked Ron.

'Oh, just a dream I've been having. Probably nothing.'

'Dream? So why'd you expect it in Snape's memory?'

Harry didn't really know but the dreams had started around the same time as Occlumency lessons.

'Maybe he planted it in your head,' said Ron when Harry told him this. 'Just to give you nightmares.'

'I don't see why he'd do that, Ron,' said Hermione. 'What reason could he have to do that?'

'Because he hates Harry. What other reason does Snape need to do anything?' He shook his head as though despairing at her faulty logic.

Harry was back in Snape's memory, hearing his dad shout, 'Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?' and the answering yells, his father's feral grin, and then...

'Look, why don't I try my dad...'

'No!'

'Shhh!' The shrill voice of Madam Pince cut through the room, her stern features staring them down. A group nearby who had been happily whispering across their table now seemed to be trying to disappear into their seats.

Ron pretended to have his nose in his book. 'Why not?' he muttered, eyes following Pince's suspicious gaze. 'They might know something...'

'I don't want this to get out. What if he doesn't know anything? You can't go round asking about someone who's supposed to have been dead for years. It's too risky.'

'So what now?'

'Well, we can't try Snape's memories again,' said Hermione. 'He won't swallow another distraction.'

'Maybe I don't want to anyway.' The words had escaped his mouth before he could stop them. He folded his arms and frowned, unsure whether he felt more angry at himself or his dad.

'What do you mean?' said Hermione.

Harry dragged a book across the table and flipped through a few pages.

'Harry?' she persisted, bringing her book down a little when he made no move to reply.

'He was with Sirius and Lupin,' he conceded flatly after a moment, his attention still set on the random pages he held open. 'And Wormtail. And my dad was everything Snape says he was arrogant, vain and he was a bully.'

'But it was Snape's memory you were looking at, right?' said Ron.

Harry looked up. 'Yeah, but it still happened. And by the sound of it, it wasn't the first time.' He turned back to his book. 'It was Snape they were bullying, actually my dad and Sirius.'

'So what?' said Ron. 'I bet he deserved it.'

'That's not the point,' said Harry. 'He was a thief, too.' At Ron's puzzled look, he added, 'He'd stolen a Snitch.'

Ron shrugged. 'So your dad wasn't a saint who is?'

'Why are you letting this get to you?' asked Hermione, a faint line between her brows.

'It made me think, that's all.'

'Think what?'

'I'd just assumed the reason he hasn't tried to get in touch with me was because he couldn't. But maybe ... maybe it's because he doesn't want to.'

Her frown deepened. 'Why on earth wouldn't he want to if he could?'

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'It's just well, when I saw him in that memory, I realised he's just a man you know? Someone with his own faults. So maybe he got scared when Voldemort found him and my mum? What if he ... you know.' He felt himself redden. It sounded a stupid thing to say now, but it was weighing on his mind after witnessing his dad's immature behaviour. 'What if he ran away?' he blurted to the creased, grubby-edged leaves of the book he gripped.

'And faked his own death?' asked Ron. 'Are you off your rocker?'

'You weren't there,' said Harry, his face burning. 'You didn't see what I saw in that memory!'

'Shh,' whispered Hermione, glancing over her shoulder. 'Keep your voices down.'

'He's lost the plot,' said Ron worriedly, jabbing a thumb in Harry's direction.

'Harry's upset, Ron, he's...'

'I'm not crazy,' said Harry to a startled Hermione. 'It's just I can't believe no one knew anything~~anything~~ in all these years. Dumbledore and Lupin have only just found out he's alive, and...'

'So now you don't think Snape's got anything to do with it?' interrupted Ron, his face still showing incredulity.

'I didn't say that, I just...'

'So Snape helped your dad fake his own death,' Ron ploughed on. 'Is that what you're saying?'

'No, of course not, but... Look, I don't know what to think any more. I'm sick of all this.' In exasperation, he threw down the book and slumped back in his chair. 'He's my dad I have a right to know the truth.' His distracted glare rested on a first-year poring over his homework at the next table.

'Look,' began Hermione after a moment. 'I have an idea. You're not going to like it, though but just hear me out.' She waited for Harry to return his attention to their table. 'Lupin's still at Hogwarts, right?'

He nodded. Lupin had been visiting the castle a lot lately. He assumed it must be either something to do with the Order now it had been re-formed, the Wolfsbane Potion or his dad. Or maybe even all three. 'Yeah. But he's not going to tell me anything, is he? He promised Snape enough times.'

'I know. But didn't he also keep trying to talk Snape into telling you?'

'Yeah.' He eyed her warily. He couldn't be more certain hell would freeze over before Snape decided to confess what he knew to him. So where was she going with this?

'Well?' and she waited, as though it were obvious. She added at his questioning look, 'So it wouldn't be so much of a surprise to Lupin if you told him that Snape had told you, would it?'

Harry frowned and Ron appeared equally baffled. 'How's that going to help?'

'Act like you know everything. Be vague and see what Lupin says.' She looked from him to Ron and back again. 'Well, does anyone have any better ideas?'

'You mean,' Harry said slowly, deliberating exactly what this would entail, *lie* to Lupin to see if I can get him to let slip something?'

She noted his disbelief. 'I told you you wouldn't like it.' She picked up her book with a frown, leaving him staring across at the cover of *Defensive Magical Theory*.

'It might be the only chance you've got, mate,' whispered Ron in his ear as he retrieved his Quidditch manual.

Harry turned the idea over in his head as his unfocused gaze stayed fixed on the bold lettering of Hermione's book. 'You're right,' he said after a while.

She peered over the pages with a questioning look.

I *don't* like it, he thought. But instead he said with a shrug and a faint smile, 'I don't have any better ideas.'

She pressed her mouth together, its corners lifting a little in reassurance.

After all he had seen that day, and with the horrible prospect of lying to Lupin ahead of him, Harry felt he really needed cheering up right then. He shifted on the hard library seat to get at least halfway comfortable, finally settling on leaning forward to rest on the table. 'So,' he said, giving Hermione and Ron an earnest look. 'Tell me what you did to Malfoy.'

Hermione's smile broadened.

-x-

'I'm certain the Dark Lord is planning something.'

'I'm sure he is,' said Dumbledore.

Snape turned to him. Down one end of the Great Hall there was a peal of childish laughter. 'Something he's not telling me.'

'You mustn't expect to be in his confidence all the time, Severus.'

'He hasn't yet told me about...'. He waited as Pomona Sprout, trampling by where they stood, made it known how delightful today's shepherd's pie had been. Snape took Dumbledore's cheerful acknowledgement away from the line of the staff table. 'He hasn't yet informed me he restored me to life.'

Dumbledore's smile was overshadowed for a second, before he blinked it back. 'Choosing his moment?'

'I think there is more to it. I think he's deliberately holding back.'

They observed goblets being refilled as empty plates were pushed aside, Dumbledore with a grave look. 'Then you must find out.'

'Are you aware of the ease with which Flintoff was captured?'

'Flintoff?'

'The Death Eater who witnessed it all. I asked you for the report on his capture.'

'Ah, yes you found something?'

'I found nothing of interest which in itself is interesting. Flintoff has been evading capture for decades, crossing Europe under various names. And yet here he is, just as the Dark Lord returns, in England, right under the Ministry's nose.'

'But not a coincidence? He would want to be at his master's side now, wouldn't he?'

'He's no easy prey. Tell me, what other useful information has he yielded?' If it had not been weighing on his mind, Snape might have found satisfaction in the falling away

of Dumbledore's doubt as his thoughts deepened. 'As I thought,' said Snape. 'And I would guess it didn't take him long to divulge his little secret about me. I shouldn't think he'd have needed truth serum to tell it, either. Only when made to confirm it.'

'But if you're suggesting he allowed himself to be captured to deliberately leak this why take the risk? What could be gained from it? Severus, I understand this is a subject you feel strongly about. But perhaps Lord Voldemort...'

'It's a test.'

Dumbledore did not seem convinced.

'He set Flintoff this task. Rather than inform me directly. He knew you would do so almost as soon as you'd heard. As in fact you did.' Snape let some of the lingering bitterness consume his worry.

'But that doesn't question your loyalty he knows you have my confidence regardless.'

'Even so. It opens the question of how I treat your confidence.'

Dumbledore turned his thoughts onto a group of giggling Ravenclaws by the door. 'But if that's true, it would mean ... He doesn't trust you entirely.'

'He's given no indication. But my delay to him this summer, and the incidents with Quirrell...'

'Of course. We knew you must tread carefully. But this is something else.' Dumbledore studied him. 'He expects you to mention what you've learned.'

'I don't believe he does,' said Snape with more certainty than he felt. 'His intention isn't to see how open I am, not on this subject at least. His interest lies only in information he regards as useful to him. And he would not expect a loyal follower to question or comment on his actions. No, I believe he merely wants to observe my reaction to the news. How I take it.'

'I see. Giving you a push, as it were?'

'Indeed. Very helpful of him.' It was some relief Dumbledore was not reminded of his somewhat foolish earlier decision to leave Hogwarts, which would have done nothing to alleviate the Dark Lord's suspicions.

Dumbledore nodded uneasily. 'You must continue to take care, then. In light of this, I rather agree it's wise to keep the others uninformed.'

Snape found himself pleasantly surprised Dumbledore viewed his concerns this way. It lessened the larger worry he might yet go behind his back to Potter. He should have thought of it before: To Dumbledore, maintaining his spy in the Dark Lord's circle trumped almost everything.

'Speaking of which,' Dumbledore said, as the last few straggles of students loitered around the tables. 'How is Harry's Occlumency coming on?'

Snape scowled. "'Coming on'?" He refuses to practise. It is essential he clears his mind at night if he's to make any progress at all and plainly he isn't. If I see that dratted dog chasing him up that tree one more time...' At Dumbledore's raised eyebrows, he added, 'His Aunt Marge's dog, apparently.'

'Perhaps ' Dumbledore sighed ' he needs more of an incentive?'

'Incentive?' The Headmaster's naivety when it came to the boy was infuriating. 'Isn't shielding his mind from the Dark Lord reason enough for him?'

'Well,' Dumbledore frowned in thought as Snape turned his eye on a cosy-looking clutch of Gryffindors, 'quite.'

## Deceit

### *Chapter 3 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

He agonised over it for days, but he couldn't keep putting it off. The full moon was coming up in a few weeks and Christmas break and he might not see Lupin again for months.

It wasn't as if he was hard to find nowadays. Harry had already seen him around the castle on several occasions since school started. 'Order business' he always said when they ran into each other. But Harry knew just what that 'Order business' was, since Lupin was spotted more often than not in or around the dungeons.

He didn't like the idea of deceiving him. Lupin was his friend, and his father's too. But it wouldn't be much of a lie in fact, it wasn't a lie at all. Not really. He just wouldn't tell him the truth. That wasn't so bad, was it?

When he overheard McGonagall tell Trelawney she had just been talking to Lupin in the staffroom, he decided it was now or never. As he made his way down the corridor his stomach was still complaining from bolting his lunch. Or maybe it was nerves.

The stone sentries on either side of the staffroom door stared down at him accusingly. He didn't have to lie. Just be vague, he told himself.

'Talking to yourself, Potter?'

He turned to see Malfoy eyeing him with hateful glee, flanked by a sniggering Crabbe and Goyle.

'First sign of insanity. Don't want to end up like Longbottom's parents, do you?'

Crabbe and Goyle grunted laughter.

'Get lost, Malfoy.'

'Looks like you're the one who's lost, Potter. Idiot Tower's *that* way.'

Malfoy clearly wasn't going anywhere, but Harry wasn't going to let the Slytherin stop him now. He turned back to the door and knocked, hoping Malfoy would take the hint.

'Not in trouble again?' sneered Malfoy as Harry kept his gaze fixed on the door. 'But I suppose you're having problems with homework and need extra lessons. How's your *remedial Potions* going?'

Harry spun around. How had he heard about that? Not from Neville or the few others who knew.

But then he noticed Crabbe grinning like a madman in a heat wave. Snape must have told Crabbe when Hermione had created the diversion for him the week before.

'How's your rash, Malfoy?' He strained to peer behind Malfoy in mock concern. 'Madam Pomfrey give you enough cream for it? I hope Goyle's not too squeamish. If you need a hand, lads, just give me a shout.'

Malfoy turned an ugly shade of red, and Goyle and Crabbe lost their oafish grins. They stood fast by Malfoy's side as he drew his wand.

Just as Harry pulled out his own wand, the door opened and Lupin appeared. His initial pleasure at seeing Harry fell away on noticing his raised wand. With a frown, he followed where it was directed toward the three Slytherins and their readied wands.

'Don't you boys have any classes to go to?' He smiled politely at Malfoy and his two sidekicks.

Malfoy glared at him, showing no intention of letting himself be told what to do by an ex-teacher, much less one who also happened to be a werewolf.

'I may not be a teacher here any more, Mr Malfoy,' said Lupin, 'but I can still talk to the Headmaster.' He extended another courteous smile.

It only intensified Malfoy's scowl. But he had no choice. Lupin wouldn't buy it if he tried to blame Harry, and Malfoy knew it.

He lowered his wand, still glaring at Lupin, and Crabbe and Goyle followed suit. He shot Harry a fiery glance as he passed that let him know he'd deal with him later.

'All right?' Lupin asked when the three Slytherins were out of earshot down the corridor. Harry nodded and replaced his wand, and Lupin said, 'Was it me you wanted to see?' He looked at his watch. 'Because I'm in a bit of a hurry, I'm afraid. I'm needed back at Order Headquarters after I see Professor Dumbledore.'

In the confrontation with Malfoy and his goons, Harry had nearly forgotten what he had come to find Lupin for. Now, on remembering, he felt his voice stick in his throat. He glanced down the empty corridor. 'I...' he began, his voice sounding shaky. Be vague, he thought, recalling Hermione's advice. He took a deep breath. 'Professor Snape told me,' he said in a rush before he lost his nerve.

Lupin was searching his face, which Harry was certain must be growing redder by the second. 'Told you what?'

'He ... told me ... about...' It was all very well being vague, but what then? He glanced up, but to his dismay, Lupin was simply waiting for him to continue. Harry turned his attention to the staffroom door, unable to look Lupin in the eye. 'About ... everything. You know, about my dad ... that he's not dead, and...' He stopped then and waited for Lupin to fill in the gaps.

He seemed to be doing just that, though not out loud. A few tense moments passed, then Lupin let out a breath that sounded to Harry's ears like relief. 'He told you?' Lupin reached to scratch the back of his neck. 'Well, I never thought he would actually tell you...' He glanced anxiously at his watch again, then looked with interest at Harry, whose wait for important hints was fast turning into an unendurable test of patience. 'You seem to be taking it quite well.'

Harry's heart thumped a stronger beat. It wasn't really that bad, was it? Was his dad in that much trouble? A slow terror took hold of him.

'You know,' Lupin's close gaze was becoming suffocating. 'Severus isn't finding it easy to come to terms with. So I hope you and he can get along better now you know. It might help. Maybe that's why he finally decided to tell you.'

'Right,' was all Harry dared to say. He had to say something.

'Look, I'm sorry, Harry. I really do need to go. I promise you we'll talk soon. All right?'

It was disheartening he hadn't discovered anything significant, anything useful. He had only succeeded in making matters worse. He looked desperately at Lupin, knowing he would mention this encounter to Snape. And then both men would know he'd been lying. Lupin's disappointment would pale in comparison to Snape's fury.

'I hope,' said Lupin in the mild teacher-like tone he used to use in class, 'you and Draco Malfoy can get along better as well, now you both have something in common in a way.' He flashed a tentative smile.

'Do we?' He couldn't help the question. Lupin's suggestion was so utterly unexpected and bewildering. What on earth could he possibly share with Draco?

A group of chattering Hufflepuffs appeared around the corner, fast approaching them. 'Yes,' said Lupin hesitantly, readying himself to leave. He seemed amused, and grinned as if the joke was obvious. The students passed by, drowning Lupin's whisper in a wave of noise. 'Well, as Draco's father is a Death Eater? Anyway, I'll see you later.'

Harry stood and stared at Lupin's head as it bobbed among the Hufflepuffs until the greying hair was swallowed in the maelstrom.

-X-

Later that afternoon the staffroom's gargoyles found themselves on the receiving end of a glare so stony it made them feel almost animate in comparison.

Snape strode into the panelled room in a foul mood. Which was perfectly normal after teaching a tiresome class of second-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

He made for the low oak table pushed up against the far wall and turned an impatient eye on the two battered canisters of tea and coffee. He didn't consider himself a coffee person, preferring the calming properties of tea over the reinvigorating powers of caffeine. But there was only one thing worse than first-year dunderheads, and that was second-year clowns.

'Ah, here you are, Severus!' Lupin sounded excruciatingly cheerful.

Definitely make it coffee, he thought with a grimace as he heard Lupin close the door after him. He reached out and grew aware of a grinning Lupin hovering next to him. 'What?' he demanded, swiping the canister from the table.

'You've done the right thing, you know.'

Snape examined the container in his hand then looked to the one on the table. 'Why? What's wrong with the tea?'

Lupin let out a loud laugh.

And then the werewolf actually slapped him on the back.

The liberties Lupin was taking were fast becoming intolerable. He would murder Dumbledore for telling the werewolf about the Potter that would not go away. The other one.

'You know what I mean,' said Lupin, still beaming in the face of Snape's outrage. 'Telling Harry.'

'Potter?' He put down the coffee. 'What about him?' What was the boy up to now?

'You know what about,' insisted Lupin with an infuriating smile. 'I saw him earlier he seemed to be taking it quite well. You see I told you there was nothing to worry about.'

Snape studied Lupin's triumph for clues; he felt the hackles on the back of his neck begin to rise. He looked him in the eye. 'What did Potter say to you?'

The werewolf's jubilant expression twitched with doubt. 'He said you'd told him.'

'Told him what?' breathed Snape. But as soon as he had asked, he knew he did not want to know the answer.

Lupin laughed feebly in a poor attempt to dispel the tension. 'Well, come on ... you know,' he said uncertainly. 'What we talked about.'

Snape intensified his glare. 'Lupin what did Potter say to you*exactly*?'

Thankfully, no evidence was now left of the werewolf's earlier joy but it had been utterly usurped by anxiety, which inspired little confidence. 'He said ... that you'd told him.' Lupin paused. 'He said he knew that ... that James isn't dead.'

If Snape's stomach hadn't already been turning for the past few moments, he was sure he would have felt it lurch at this. But he was less sure whether it was solely because the boy had somehow discovered something, or also because of the simple, casual remark that affected him so deeply. 'Is that all he said?'

Lupin's nod was hesitant.

'You're certain?'

'Yes. You did ... you did tell him, didn't you?'

Snape stared at his naivety. 'Did I not say many times that I would not tell the boy?'

Lupin's deepening confusion was testing Snape's patience. 'But,' said Lupin, 'if you didn't ... How did he find out?'

'That is what I would like to know.' Potter always managed to get himself into mischief by some means, just like his father before him. But the method was irrelevant; of higher priority now was to ascertain exactly what he knew. He studied Lupin's dazed expression. 'Well? What did you say to him then?'

'I, er, I was in a hurry. Dumbledore wanted to see me before London. I don't...' His eyes widened. 'Oh ... oh, no.' He blanched.

'What?'

Lupin was gripping the edge of the table. 'I have to find him.' He turned to leave.

In one swift movement, Snape blocked his way with an angry stare. 'Lupin. Tell me what you said to the boy. If by some merciful chance you managed not to blurt the whole lot out, I am not about to let you fill him in now.'

'Let me past, Severus. I am not going to let him think...' He tried to move away, but Snape forced him back, pinning him to the table edge.

'You are not going anywhere until you tell me what you said to him.'

Lupin did well to evince an almost pleading gaze through his obviously painful tension. It took a moment for him to realise he was never going to win this one; his grip on the oak at his back loosened as he released a breath. 'He and Draco Malfoy were arguing in the corridor. I thought maybe if I ... I was just trying to lighten...' His look was pained. 'I thought you'd told him everything I would never have said it otherwise.'

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'What *about* Draco?'

Lupin swallowed. 'I pointed out he and Draco have something in common.' His voice was low and grating. 'That they both ... that Draco's father's...' He ended with another awkward bob of the throat.

'Is a Death Eater?' Snape finished for him.

Lupin's nod was watchful, Snape noticed.

'That is all you told him?'

'Yes,' said Lupin, a touch of relief in his voice. 'I had to go then. Some students came by we didn't get a chance to talk further.'

Snape eased back from him. 'Listen to me, Lupin...'

Lupin shook his head. 'No. I have to tell him. I'm not going to let Harry think his fa...'

'Listen! First of all, you will find out how and what he knows and what he thinks my involvement is in this. Then if he doesn't already know everything *you'll* do this, Lupin you will tell him James Potter is working undercover for the Order, and that is all. You got the boy into this mess,' he added at Lupin's dejection. At least it meant he had won this battle. For now. 'You will tell him he is working for Dumbledore, and nothing else. Is that plain?'

'I don't like lying to him.'

Snape sneered. 'Potter had no qualms about lying to you.' He moved away to a mismatched armchair and rested his hands on its back to think better. 'But we must be economical with the truth.' He dug his fingers into the worn upholstery. 'Tell him Dumbledore and I alone knew these past years, that he had to remain undercover and still does.'

'Well, that's not true, is it?'

'For pity's sake. Potter obviously went to you with the aim of finding out the rest of what, hopefully little, he had already discovered. His intention was to catch you out.' He glared at Lupin. 'Which clearly worked. You should be thankful I'm permitting you to tell him even this.'

The werewolf's cogs were moving but plainly deciding it was best not to argue the point further, after a moment he straightened and strode to the door.

'Meet me in my office afterwards,' Snape called out as Lupin left.

He had to wait over an hour.

He had already made a start on rearranging the ingredients on his shelves for the second time when Lupin slumped into the nearest chair. 'I told him.'

Snape put down the jar of half-rotten lizard tongues he had somehow missed earlier. He scrutinised Lupin's heavy look. 'How much does he know? How did he find out?'

'He knows very little. He overheard us the day Dumbledore told me.'

'You and Dumbledore?'

'You and I. In here.'

'In here?' Were there no bounds to the boy's arrogance? He seethed at Lupin's melancholy. At least the boy hadn't been prowling around his memories during an Occlumency lesson that was what he had feared the most. 'Sneaking around again, poking his nose in other people's business, the foolhardy...'

'DON'T talk about him like that!'

Taken aback, Snape observed his distress for a second. Then it occurred to him: 'He must have used that Invisibility Cloak.' He scowled at Lupin's squirm of confirmation. 'I should confiscate it from him. After all, it's more mine than his, isn't it?'

The werewolf's overwrought look intensified into something resembling anger.

Snape ignored it. 'Can he be trusted to keep what he knows to himself?'

'I don't know why I... I'm only here at all because Dumbledore asked.'

By the tightness around his mouth, it was plainly meant to be righteous anger. But Snape wasn't about to let him have the monopoly on that. Not after the mess he had made today. 'Because he told. Because he told you what he had no business to tell you.'

'I want to help. But you don't tell me anything.'

'Tell you what? Are you my confessor, werewolf? Is Dumbledore paying you a wage? Merlin knows you need it.' Lupin's face burned as Snape raked his eyes over his shabby clothes. 'Say whatever it is you want to say.'

'I didn't know you were with Voldemort at Godric's Hollow.'

Snape's mind was a forest floor in autumn swept clean by a gust. Dead leaves, sleep disturbed, chased each other away, until the forest was straight and still again. He floated his voice down the gentle waters of its stream. 'It seems plain you do know.'

'I didn't before Dumbledore told me.' Lupin appeared eager to make full use of the small foothold he had found. 'What else have you been keeping to yourself?'

'Are you accusing me of knowing all along?'

'No I'm not...'

'Do you think it gives me pleasure, that my soul is not mine but Potter's? Do you think I would have chosen it, if the Dark Lord had given me the choice?'

Lupin was blessedly silent.

'I have no memory of what happened to me. I was dead for a time. Dead. No ' he said as Lupin made to speak ' no, I don't remember my own death.' He paused to take in Lupin's discomfort, savoured it for a second. 'I suppose Dumbledore has told you it was Potter who killed me or did he spare you the gory details?' Lupin was shaking his head now whether because he had not been told or did not want to listen again, Snape neither knew nor cared. 'Oh yes, your dear friend Potter. And when he took my life, that moment went with it. The only witness left was the Death Eater with us, the one now in Azkaban. The Dark Lord was finished that night, remember? Or so we all thought.'

Lupin's ludicrous indignation had died down, replaced by an equally unbecoming determination to prove some point. 'But surely you must have wondered why? Why you didn't remember? Why there was a gap in your memory...?'

'I have no wish to relive that night!' He had raised his voice an unforgivable lapse and Lupin showed surprised. Snape turned away.

Though he had no wish to relive it, it seemed his sleeping mind had other plans of late.

Sleep now there was a novelty. If the Dark Lord's return was not bad enough, he now had this knowledge to deal with as well. He had stopped taking Dreamless Sleeping Potion. It had loosened the mind during the day useless if thoughts and emotions were to remain disciplined. He could afford no distractions; he had to reclaim his mind for his own. But the nights did not belong to him.

He hated dreams. They were the thoughts that resisted control, buried emotions that clawed their way back. Only this morning he had woken from an especially vivid one of the recent run. It had begun as they usually did with Dumbledore once more demonstrating the test on his magical core. In Snape's hand his wand had pointed out his fate again. He had refuted it. He had turned away. He had slammed the door behind him. But instead of the spiral staircase outside Dumbledore's office, there was the sparse cottage hallway as though it had been lying in wait. His gaze had fallen on the body of James Potter.

Potter's glasses lay broken on the floor, his naked eyes staring up at the low-beamed ceiling. The Dark Lord's voice, shrilling through Snape's body, was giving the order to find the boy. He stepped over Potter to reach the staircase. But he had barely placed one foot on the narrow wooden steps when he felt the hand grab him. He was dragged down and forced around. 'THIEF!' Potter was shrieking, hazel eyes wild without his glasses, hands moving to grasp Snape's neck. 'Give me back my soul! Thief! THIEF!' Fingers tightened around his throat; he was being shaken sharply back and forth as though Potter were trying to loosen and release from him what was rightfully his.

It was then, as he struggled to find his breath and stem his rising horror, Snape noticed the Dark Lord was watching. He appeared as he did now, with slits marking the place where a noble nose had once been. His laughter was echoing around the small house and growing both in volume and depravity as Potter's anger and grip intensified. It ended only when the constant shaking sent Snape stumbling back against the hard stairs.

It was merely a senseless dream. He had no way of knowing what had really happened that night. He had never questioned his hazy memory why wouldn't he have cast off some parts? That was what he had assumed he had done.

But now the gaps haunted him. What did they contain? His mind, so restless it broke free from the constraints of Occlumency he imposed at night, was only too willing to fill them in for him.

'I suppose that's why the Dark Lord gave me Potter's life in return he plainly thought it was the least Potter could do.' Of course he knew his true reasons had been otherwise. The Dark Lord had brought him back from just beyond the brink of death simply to continue using him as a spy against Dumbledore... But instead the Dark Lord had succeeded in making sure Dumbledore had his spy against *him*. Snape could have smiled at the irony. He looked back and saw Lupin's face was grim.

'The Darkest magic...'

'Yes, the Dark Lord would have enjoyed using it.' Snape let the heavy silence stand for a moment, then returned to his earlier question. 'Can the boy be trusted to keep what he knows to himself?'

Now he had exhausted his collection of bones to pick over, Lupin's pause was telling. 'He wanted to talk to Sirius.'

'Black?' Snape held his breath. That was the last thing he needed, Black knowing about this. Thank Merlin they had caught Potter before it was too late.

'He wants to, but I told him it was important he tell no one, not even Sirius.'

'*Especially* not Black,' Snape corrected.

Lupin glared like a defeated child. 'Now he's having lessons in Occlumency, what harm would there be in telling Harry the truth?'

'You seem to be under the illusion he's making any kind of progress.'

'He will improve.'

'Really?' He let his gaze wander to the shelves and felt himself relaxing for the first time that afternoon. 'Highly doubtful certainly not at this rate. He doesn't do as he's told, just like his fa...'. He left the rest unspoken on remembering the man he had managed to forget for one glorious moment. He turned to his desk. 'In any case, I have a feeling the Dark Lord expected Potter to be informed by Dumbledore as I was. It is better the boy knows as little as possible.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think all this was leaked purposely by the Dark Lord. As a test,' he added at Lupin's frown.

'To test Harry?'

Sometimes the werewolf's idiocy was testing enough. 'Why would he want to test Potter? To test *me*.'

Lupin blinked, confusion falling back to concern. 'He thinks...?'

'Perhaps. I don't know. We shall see. Best not to tell Dumbledore of your stupidity today,' he said, turning a sneer on Lupin's shallow worry. 'You might find the castle barred if it's decided you've made one mess too many.' He watched the conflicting emotions play over him. 'Everything must be as normal,' he said.

As normal as can be, he thought, now the boy believed James Potter lived, and to be a spy among the Death Eaters.

## The secret agent

### Chapter 4 of 11

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

'That is so cool. I wish my dad was a spy.'

'It's really dangerous, Ron.' Harry kept his voice low as Seamus grabbed a cushion from a nearby armchair, tossed it back down in frustration, and moved on to one currently occupied by a confused-looking first year.

'Yeah, but at least he's alive, mate. It was only a few weeks ago you thought he was dead anyway.'

'But I still don't want him getting hurt.' Harry hunkered down to carry on trying to catch up on homework. Though with Ron's regular comments of approval about James from his seat opposite, he was finding it hard to concentrate on the Charms essay which he was painfully aware was due first thing tomorrow.

'Listen to you two.' Hermione closed her book over a finger and laid it in her lap. 'Typical boys.'

'What d'you mean?' said Ron.

'Cool! I wish *my* dad was a spy!'" she said, doing her best imitation of an over-enthusiastic Ron.

'Well, I do. My dad collects Muggle plugs and things. Not exactly something you'd want to brag about, is it?'

'I can't tell anyone anyway, Ron,' said Harry. 'I can't risk blowing his cover.'

'Bummer.' Ron gave him a look of pity. 'You've got the coolest dad in the school and you can't tell anyone.'

Hermione rolled her eyes and tutted.

Harry put down his quill and smirked at her in a sly way. 'Potter James Potter,' he said, taking off a refined accent.

Hermione snorted laughter and slumped back in her armchair, forgetting to be serious for a moment. 'He even has the same first name!' she said. Harry grinned at her.

Ron looked at them, bewildered. 'What? What's so funny?'

Hermione stifled her giggles. 'It's a character in a film, Ron. You know what a film is? I did say you should have taken Muggle Studies.'

'I know what a *film* is,' said Ron dismissively. 'Dad's seen some. Says they're nothing special just like photos but with sound. Anyway, I'm not doing Muggle Studies just so

I can get all your lame in-jokes.'

Hermione and Harry glanced at one another and burst into giggles again.

'I'm glad you find it so funny,' said Ron with a serious expression Harry initially took as sulkiness. 'Harry's dad's out there risking his life for him, for the Order well, for everyone, isn't he? He's spying on You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters, and Merlin knows what danger he's in every single day.'

Harry sobered up. 'Yeah, thanks for that, Ron.'

'Wow,' said Hermione dreamily.

'Don't you start,' said Harry.

'Sorry. Well, it certainly beats having dentists for parents.'

Harry shook his head and picked up his quill to refocus on the essay. What was that charm for making everyone believe you were their best friend? He was sure Flitwick had mentioned a wizard who had used it to con money out of people, before the man had got caught trying to charm goblins, who were well known for being immune to the spell. If he could think of his name, he might get an extra mark on this thing.

'So, who else knows?' Hermione had adopted her serious tone again.

'Just Lupin, Dumbledore and Snape,' said Harry, 'as far as I know. Lupin said only Snape and Dumbledore knew about it all along, and Lupin just found out recently.'

'Why have they told Lupin now?' she asked.

Harry shrugged. 'Didn't say.'

'So,' said Ron, 'Dumbledore can tell you how your dad is, then.'

'I don't think so,' said Hermione. 'If no one else knows anything, then it's pretty obvious Harry's dad goes through Snape. Maybe Dumbledore never meets him in person, just uses Snape as the go-between. That'd make his cover pretty water-tight, wouldn't it?'

'Bloody hell,' said Ron. 'If that's true, you've got no chance of finding out anything from Snape, mate.'

'Thanks, Ron.' Harry gazed miserably at his far-from-completed Charms work.

'But,' began Ron, 'how come You-Know-Who really believes your dad would want to be a Death Eater and disown you, after all he did?'

'Yeah well,' said Harry, 'Voldemort's mad enough, isn't he? And besides, it's only recently Voldemort's come back.'

'Not according to the Ministry,' pointed out Hermione.

'Well, Dumbledore's still working on that.' Dumbledore did seem to be spending a lot of time away from the school lately trying to convince the Ministry of Voldemort's return. If they had only believed Harry when he had tried to tell them this summer, Dumbledore wouldn't be having to do all this now.

'Why would You-Know-Who want to make it look like your dad died, though?' asked Ron.

'Maybe so no one would try to rescue him?' Harry shrugged. 'Who knows what goes through the mind of a madman like Voldemort? Maybe he tried to brainwash him, and Dad let him believe it'd worked.'

'And no one else knows who your dad is?' asked Hermione. 'The other Death Eaters, I mean?'

'As far as I know, they always wear masks when they get together,' said Harry. 'Maybe he uses a false name, too I dunno.'

'And Sirius doesn't know anything?' she asked.

'Not a thing.' It felt odd, Sirius not knowing when Lupin did. 'And Lupin said I wasn't to say anything to him. I don't see why. He was my dad's best friend it's not like he's gonna go around shouting about it. Can't very well do that stuck in his house anyway, can he?'

'Harry,' said Hermione slowly, narrowing her eyes. 'Aren't we missing something here?'

'Like what?'

'Well... Why did Dumbledore tell the Ministry that Sirius was your parents' Secret-Keeper? I mean, your dad knew it had been Pettigrew. He must have told Dumbledore that.'

He stared, dumbstruck. With all the excitement of imagining his dad's adventures, he'd forgotten about Sirius's past. He worked through the implications. 'You're right. He would have told him, wouldn't he? Then they'd have known Wormtail was lying, that he must have faked his own death to pin it on Sirius. Dad would never have let Sirius rot in Azkaban for all those years.'

'But then maybe,' she said, staying unreasonably calm, 'if Dumbledore had told them the truth about the Secret-Keeper, it might have blown your dad's cover after all, who else could have let Dumbledore know other than your dad the only one still alive, apart from Wormtail himself, out of those who'd set the Fidelius Charm?'

'Maybe it wouldn't have helped anyway. But I still don't believe Dad would've let that happen to Sirius, even if it might have put him in danger otherwise.'

'But you're forgetting,' said Ron, 'his cover's so deep he probably has to go through Snape with everything. Maybe it was like that then too.'

Harry studied him. 'You think he told Snape and Snape said nothing to Dumbledore about it?'

Ron snorted. 'Come on, mate. Snape *hates* Sirius. Makes sense now why Sirius isn't being told about all this now he's out of Azkaban, doesn't it?'

'But James wouldn't have kept quiet about it,' said Hermione. 'He could at least have told Dumbledore who the true Secret-Keeper had been. There's got to be another explanation.'

'Like what?' said Ron. 'Maybe he didn't have a choice. Snape's the one in control here. You don't want to believe any professor would put an innocent man in jail? Remember, he nearly got Sirius Kissed by Dementors a few years back. This is *Snape* we're talking about.'

'Snape thought Sirius was a murderer, Ron.'

'No, he didn't, Hermione. That's the point. He knew Wormtail had lied Harry's dad must have told Snape the truth. So the slimy git had to have known Wormtail had framed Sirius.' Ron seemed pleasantly surprised at having worked that one out for himself.

The fury that had been building inside Harry was making itself felt. 'How could he do that? He's been even meaner about my dad this year, too.'

'Stands to reason,' said Ron, still basking in his insight while Hermione stayed unusually quiet.

'Why?' asked Harry. 'They're supposed to be on the same side now, aren't they?'

'He's jealous, isn't he? I bet your dad makes a much better spy than Snape~~ever~~ could.'

Hermione broke her affronted silence. 'So you're admitting Professor Snape~~is~~ a spy for us then, Ron?'

Ron waved this off. 'I'm not saying he's any good. All the useful stuff Dumbledore gets is probably from Harry's dad. I wouldn't be surprised if Snape passed some of it off as his own work to stay in Dumbledore's good books. Plus, he hated Sirius enough to leave him to the Dementors in Azkaban, hates Harry and Harry's dad. Not exactly one of the good guys then, is he?'

'But if he really hated Harry's dad that much, he'd have shopped him to You-Know-Who~~years~~ ago.'

'Yeah, well.' Ron shrugged. 'Can't excuse what he did to Sirius, though.'

'I still can't believe that.' Harry shook his head as he thought. 'Because then Dumbledore would've known Snape had held back on him. He~~de~~~~ver~~ have trusted him after that.'

'Hey,' said Seamus, coming up to them again. 'Anyone seen my Charms homework? I was sure it was in my room.'

Hermione and Ron had to tell him they hadn't, and Seamus went off to search the library, while Harry's thoughts were returned to his own barely begun essay in front of him. He picked up his quill and leaned over his textbook with reluctance.

His attention kept wandering in the direction of his dad, his thoughts swirling around the complexities of all the subterfuge.

After reading the same paragraph twice, he sighed in defeat, letting his quill drop, and leaned back. With his mind elsewhere, he watched his friends. On the table between them, Ron was trying to balance several Exploding Snap cards, and Hermione had returned to her book. 'You know,' he said, now the Common Room had become quieter again, 'it makes me feel less alone now I know my dad's out there somewhere trying to get rid of Voldemort. I mean, Sirius is trying, and I appreciate that, but he can't leave Grimmauld Place. But Dad he probably goes to Death Eater meetings, gets important information for the Order and generally manages to pull the wool over Voldemort's eyes.'

'He's very brave, Harry,' said Hermione.

He returned her smile. 'Yeah. I just wish I could see him. Even just for a few minutes that'd be something better than nothing. I'd know he was all right then, too.'

'How far are you on your essay, mate?' Ron held up a crumpled parchment he had just extracted from beneath a small heap of books on the floor beside him. 'I've just found Seamus's homework.' He grinned and glanced cautiously around the room.

'Ron!' said Hermione. 'I hope you're not suggesting what I think you are.'

'Don't worry, Hermione,' said Harry. 'Plagiarism's a mortal sin right, Ron?' He sneaked Ron a small mischievous smile.

'I'll take it to him.' She rose from her seat. 'He's in the library, right?' She snatched it from Ron and marched to the door.

Ron made a face at Harry when she left. Harry grinned and picked up his quill. He turned back to his copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Five*, found his place, and began to read the paragraph for a third time.

-X-

Harry Potter was in the centre of a grim room. Damp covered its walls, leaving the greying wallpaper hanging off in places, and a bleak light emanated from a fixture in the ceiling. Cold hung in the air. A key turned in a lock behind him, and he turned around...

Potter fell back against the chair when Snape released him from the spell.

Snape lowered his wand. 'What place is that?'

'I dunno.' Potter slumped, panting, into the chair. Snape had never seen anything so odd and unrecognisable in the boy's head. Perhaps it was simply an image of a recent nightmare? Potter was reticent, and Snape had the feeling he wasn't telling him everything.

Potter got to his feet again, bracing himself and making a feeble attempt to clear his mind of emotion in preparation for the next test.

'Handing me weapons again, Potter.' Snape regarded the boy's shabby concentration, his wand already raised in self-defence. 'Will you ever give that up? At least I don't see that blasted dog as often.'

Snape noticed the boy swallow and his face flush. Was it possible he had been pushing forward images of his idiotic Muggle relatives to cover up something else? Something important that Potter hadn't wanted him to see? But what?

'Sir? Can I ask you something?'

'It had better be something to do with Occlumency.'

Potter held his tongue. He lowered his gaze along with his wand, the former to the desk between them.

Here it comes, thought Snape. He had been dreading the boy asking questions about his father and had planned some suitable answers to possible questions. 'That is what we are here for after all is it not, Potter?' He raised a challenging eyebrow.

'This is to shield my mind from Vol... from *him* isn't it?' Potter glanced up. 'Sir?' he added, plainly as an afterthought.

Snape studied the boy's anxiety. Hadn't he already explained this? 'That is the general idea, yes.'

'What for?'

Snape arched his eyebrows in mock amazement. "'What for'?" Perhaps you *want* to be able to think and feel what the Dark Lord thinks and feels to open up your mind to him?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then what is your confusion?'

'I'm not confused. I'm just ... I was just wondering ... if Vo...' Potter affected a sigh. '...if *he* could know what *I'm* thinking sometimes, too.'

Snape observed the boy for a moment. He chose his words carefully. 'I suppose that is possible. The Headmaster did have some concerns in that area.' While Dumbledore had mentioned something about Potter's recent potentially aggressive attitude around him, he hadn't specifically suggested that the Dark Lord may be using Legilimency on Potter which, of course, required eye contact. But Snape was reluctant to deny its possibility if doing so meant the boy's complacency.

Potter nodded hard and fixed his eyes on the desk. 'Right.'

Where was this line of questioning supposed to be leading? Contrary to what Snape had expected, it did not seem to be about James Potter after all. The boy continued to stare resolutely ahead at the table, as though he'd suddenly found inspiration in his paperwork. More than he himself ever found.

'Shall we continue, then?' Snape said at last. Since he had, of course, intended it as a command, not a suggestion, Snape raised his wand.

Potter lifted his head and met his gaze. 'Is my dad in the Order?'

Momentarily startled by the question combined with the sudden resumption of eye contact, Snape's focus on his lead into the spell wavered. 'What?' he murmured.

'I mean, technically is he in the Order of the Phoenix?'

Snape lowered his arm. These were more like the type of questions he had been expecting. He considered his answer. The boy had most likely been told something about the original Order, so it would not be too difficult to deflect him. 'Well, he *was*, wasn't he?'

Potter was silent for a moment, probably thinking of Black's boasts of yesteryear. 'Yeah. But is *he* now, I mean?'

Snape hadn't become the spy he was today without knowing how to not tell the truth and yet not exactly lie either. Lies had their place, of course, but they could be slippery. He knew from experience that, when in doubt, simply reply with another question as though the overly curious were dense cretins who needed everything spelt out to them in the simplest terms. Of course, Potter fell naturally into this group anyway. 'If he was, wouldn't everyone else in the Order know about it?'

Potter frowned in thought. 'So he operates through you, then?'

This threw Snape off for a second; he did not like the distasteful way these questions were sounding. 'He ... what?'

'You pass the information he gives you on to Professor Dumbledore?'

Snape inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. 'Mmm.' He mentally berated himself for his childish paranoia and waited for more. He supposed he might as well get as much as possible of this uncomfortable grilling over with now.

'Does he ... does he have the Dark Mark?'

Snape took a certain satisfaction in his answer. 'Yes. Yes, he does.' He saw the boy's eyes move to his left forearm where his brand was, putting him on edge. As he stood there under Potter's horrified gaze, he idly wondered whether he ought not to add a teaspoonful of sugar to Lupin's Wolfsbane Potion to teach the werewolf to keep his mouth shut in future. Revenge truly was sweet. He smirked at his pun.

The boy chose that moment to glance up. His horror gave way to red-faced anger. 'Why doesn't Sirius know anything about this?'

Snape pressed his lips together in annoyance. 'The fewer who know, the better.'

'He was my dad's best friend.'

Snape made a derisive noise. *Not any longer, Potter.*

The boy regarded him with growing dislike and moved to tighten his grip on his wand. 'I know why he doesn't know.'

Snape watched him with detached interest. 'Really?'

'Yeah. Because then you'd have to admit to him you didn't tell Dumbledore that you let him rot in Azkaban.'

Snape curled his lip in scorn. 'What is this nonsense, Potter? What am I supposed to have not told Dumbledore?'

'That Sirius wasn't my parents' Secret-Keeper that it was actually Wormtail. My parents had told everyone it had been Sirius so no one would suspect Wormtail. But Dumbledore would have told the Ministry the truth, and they would have known Sirius wasn't a killer they'd have known Wormtail had set him up. And Sirius would never have gone to Azkaban.'

Snape stared. The boy seemed to have some intelligence after all. But why hadn't he thought of it himself? He saw again the address the Dark Lord had shown him on their arrival in the village of Godric's Hollow. Ink like the night on parchment bleached orange from the light of the street lamp. He had always simply assumed it had been written in Black's hand.

'Well?' the boy demanded, his face still set with childish rage.

Snape looked stolidly ahead. 'He forgot.'

Potter gave him an incredulous look. 'He *forgot*?'

The boy thinks I'm lying, Snape thought. How ironic. Perhaps he should tell him the truth: His father had destroyed his chance, and everyone else's life with it. He narrowed his eyes at Potter's impatience. The spell the Dark Lord performed on him memory loss was one of its effects. He simply did not remember he assumed Black had indeed been the Secret-Keeper, as everyone else did.'

Potter contemplated this in silence.

'No need to apologise, Potter really,' Snape scoffed. 'You only accused me of sending an innocent man to prison, after all.'

But the boy apparently hadn't heard him. 'That explains,' he said slowly, 'the Reverse Spell effect. Priori Inc... something.'

'Priori Incantatem?' asked Snape, and he saw Potter nod. 'What about it?'

'When Voldem...' The boy broke off when he saw the look of warning at the name. But he was eager to go on. 'When I met him in June, our wands didn't work properly when he fought me when they connected because they share the same core.'

Had the boy mistaken him for a first-year student, Snape wondered. 'I know all that, but what *about* it?'

'I saw echoes of what he'd used his wand on. They came out of it in reverse order. I saw ... Cedric Diggory.' He paused at this to take a breath. 'And my mum and dad. So

that must have been because of the spell he did on my dad, and not because he'd killed him. Because the first thing I saw was the new hand he'd made Wormtail.'

Snape made sure his expression remained unreadable before asking, 'And the last thing you saw?'

'My dad.'

He studied Potter until he was satisfied the boy was not lying or holding back anything important. He thanked Merlin the Dark Lord's connection had been broken at that point. Potter would certainly have had questions if an image of him had emerged from the wand next. It might not have done, of course since Snape's memory was indeed of little use, he had no idea what kind of Dark magic the Dark Lord had used that day; it could have merely involved the soul transference and hence only the death of the boy's father's body.

'So what did he do?' Potter asked impatiently, pulling Snape out of his own thoughts.

'Who?'

Potter screwed his face up in an ugly look of defiance. 'Voldemort.' His boldness increased on seeing the effect. 'What did he do to my dad?'

The uncomfortable questioning was getting more tedious by the second; it was almost as bad as being interrogated by the Dark Lord himself. 'I have no idea.' He looked over at the clock on the wall. 'Well, it seems it is nearly the end of our lesson sadly there is no time left to start practising again now.' Potter stayed mercifully silent as he regarded the boy. 'It is also our last lesson of this term. Let us hope you don't slip behind over the Christmas break. But then,' he sneered, 'seeing as you have made no progress at all in the weeks we have been doing this, there is little risk of that, is there?'

Potter stood where he was for a moment. 'See you in the New Year, then,' he said at last, '... sir.'

Snape watched him leave. Something about Potter's delayed reaction made him uneasy. There had been a suggestion of purpose, some resolve, that he didn't like.

But what could the boy possibly do over Christmas? If he was staying with his dear godfather, Lupin would very probably be there too. He would make sure the boy didn't get any ideas about telling Black his father was alive. No, the werewolf wouldn't dare to place at risk the special access he thought he now had to his old friend Potter.

After he had returned his memories from the Pensieve, he went back to the marking from which he had broken off for the boy's pointless lesson.

Just being paranoid, he told himself as he plunged his quill into the red inkpot.

## Reformed, eh?

### *Chapter 5 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

Harry lay back in the four-poster and gazed at the oak as it thrashed its gnarled fingers at the night. Its twisting fury seemed a world away from the serenity of the room, where only the fire under the chimney quivered.

His first Christmas with Sirius was turning out to be just as enjoyable as he had imagined. He had been looking forward to it for ages, and having Lupin spend it with them made it all the better. Harry had barely had time to settle in before Sirius had brought out the photo album on the first snowy evening in the kitchen. Harry had gazed hungrily at it, each waving picture beckoning the Christmas he would one day spend with all of them Sirius, Lupin and his dad too. Sirius was full of tales, and Harry was eager to hear them all. Lupin was less enthusiastic Sirius had to tease out his side of every story but it wasn't hard to guess why, since Harry felt just as guilty about knowing something Sirius didn't. Especially when Sirius grew quiet when remembering James.

Harry hated that. Lupin was adamant Sirius must not know until his dad was ready. Sirius wasn't exactly the kind of person who could keep that type of knowledge to himself, Harry knew that. Sirius was far from reluctant to talk about what they had got up to at school gory details and all. Lupin simply frowned at the parts that made Harry squirm. He tried not to remember what he had seen in Snape's memory of the day of their OWL exam, how his dad and Sirius had picked on Snape. He preferred not to think of his dad like that.

So it wasn't difficult to see why it was felt Sirius should not know yet. Still, it was hard. But his dad's safety was his priority right now. If he was to see him again, Harry had to make sure that his knowing he was alive did not put his dad in danger.

And that meant putting some effort into Occlumency. He wasn't about to lose his father again and definitely not because he couldn't be bothered with this 'shielding the mind' thing. What Snape had said had become a kind of mantra, because if Voldemort could see into his thoughts, then he was going to have to make certain he would never see that one thing. Just that one thing could bring his world down.

For the last few days he had gone to bed closing his mind. He was getting the hang of it, he was sure. Once you focused on the thing that really mattered, you just put it to one side, a bit like boxing it up to save for another day. It was a piece of cake, really.

Apart from the headaches, which sometimes made it more difficult to concentrate.

Trying not to think or feel also made looking at photos and listening to Sirius's stories harder but there was that day to look forward to. That day would come, he knew, and then there would be no need for feverish dreams it would be real.

Until then, he boxed and labelled and bottled. Thoughts, feelings, emotions his entire mind was a minefield. Everything had to be tucked away securely.

Christmas was great but torture though at night he tried not to let himself feel much of anything either way. During the day, he had little choice but to go along with Sirius's nostalgia. Harry wasn't exactly complaining. It was just for Christmas. Even megalomaniacs like Voldemort took a break at Christmas, didn't they?

He closed his eyes and listened to the tree's creaking limbs. The dreams he had chased over the past several weeks began their usual clamour for his attention. He tipped every one of them, without mercy, out of his mind and let the strained sighs of the old oak fill the void.

Snape cursed Dumbledore under his breath for forcing him to recite various items of confectionery while having the audacity to not even be in his office anyway. He was almost certainly with a Ministry official again trying to convince those fools of the Dark Lord's return.

But there was a chance he could be at Order headquarters.

He tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. How he loathed Christmas. It was at times of Muggle celebrations that the Death Eaters grew more restless for sport.

He stepped through the grate into Black's kitchen. The first thing he noted, with despair and more than a little frustration, was the lack of a Headmaster in fact, the lack of anyone. The second thing was the pungent smell of burning. It was easy to pinpoint the source apparently inside the large oven against the far wall. It seemed Black's first Christmas back in his old family house was going to be a sorry affair after all. He smiled at the tendrils of smoke drifting through the iron door.

Out in the hallway, he heard the soft hum of voices seeping from the drawing room. He swept past the snoozing portrait of Black's mother and thrust open the door. Inside, Black looked up from a raised glass; Lupin, standing by a tinsel-bordered fireplace, followed suit. Snape was on the verge of asking on Dumbledore's whereabouts when a creak sounded from a large armchair, its high back to the door. Hoping it was occupied by Dumbledore, he stepped forward. But to his annoyance it turned out merely to be the Potter boy, who was now staring back with an expression that divulged mutual feelings.

He turned to Black. 'Where's Dumbledore?'

Black glared. 'Would be nice if you knocked, Snape. We were having such a wonderful time till you barged in.'

'My apologies for interrupting your ah leisure time.' Snape regarded him coolly. 'Of which I am certain you have precious little otherwise. But not everybody can neglect their duties merely because it is Christmas. Or any other time of the year, for that matter.'

Black bristled visibly; satisfied, Snape turned to Lupin. 'Where is he? Is he here?'

'No,' said Lupin with a trace of concern. 'Is it important?'

Before he could answer, Black cut in, plainly eager to avoid chitchat. 'Isn't he at Hogwarts?'

'Yes, of course he is,' jeered Snape, 'that is why I am here looking for him.'

It didn't escape his notice Black seemed to be expending a lot of effort in refraining from a retort. He clearly wanted him to leave so they could resume their festivities. Snape suppressed delight his trip had not been utterly wasted after all.

'I don't know where he might be,' said Lupin from his place by the fire. 'But he did say he would come by...'

'But we're not sure when,' Black said hurriedly. 'We'll send him straight on to the school. So you might as well wait for him there, eh?'

Snape let his triumph show. Yes Black was so eager for his presence not to spoil his Christmas, he was making a poor job of hiding it undoubtedly because his precious godson was spending it with him. He felt his smirk broaden at the thought of Black's already ruined Christmas busy smouldering in the kitchen.

'But he'll be here soon, Sirius,' Lupin put in. 'Severus might as well wait.' He turned to him. 'If it's important?'

Lupin was handing it to him on a plate. To turn down his invitation to further upset Black's happy little scene would simply be rude. After all, it was Christmas. 'The consequences may be dire, I fear, if he is not informed at the earliest opportunity of what I've learned.' In reality, a few hours' wait would still allow for the necessary measures to ensure the Muggle sport would be less of an event than expected but he could happily spend all day rubbing Black's face in the fact he at least was doing something useful for the Order.

'Well, why don't you wait in the kitchen, then?' Black spilled firewhisky with his impatient gesture. 'That's the only fireplace in the house hooked up. You can catch him as soon as he arrives if it's that important,' he added, seeming to smell the lie; because of his dog senses, perhaps. But then Black himself reeked of desperation.

'Oh, I would but I may be overcome by the fumes before his arrival.'

Black looked at him as though he were delirious. 'Fumes? What fumes?'

'From your ah Christmas dinner, I suppose. Or what remains of it.' At Black's confusion, he added with a smirk, 'I believe your dear house-elf has left you a present.'

When comprehension dawned, Black erupted into fury. He slammed his glass down on a table, splashing its contents onto the varnished surface. 'Kreacher! KREACHER!' He stormed past and out of the room.

Perhaps Christmas did have its merits after all.

Happy visions of Black's furious ranting in the kitchen were interrupted by the sound of attempted laughter. 'I told him it was a mistake letting his mother's elf prepare it.'

Snape watched as a genial smile stole over Lupin's face, directed at him. He turned from it with a scowl. How he despised the werewolf's insistence on treating him as an old friend he'd been reunited with, even to the point of overlooking his intentional barbs and insults. His resentment deepened whenever he caught sight of that insufferable amiability.

Lupin had persisted in inflicting his unwanted presence on him over the past weeks. He had seen through all the werewolf's pathetic pretexts. Lupin had never before sought his views on any Order affairs, least of all the most trivial. Snape had no opinions on which cakes Molly Weasley might bring to the next meeting, nor did he care a whit how the newest members were getting on. And never had Lupin given the slightest sign of prior interest in the intricacies of the Wolfsbane Potion. As soon as he'd begun suggesting games of wizard chess, Snape had decided enough was enough.

But to his horror he had discovered that warding his doors and refraining from answering on his free evenings had failed to repel him. Lupin had simply begun using the Floo instead. When he had emerged from the fireplace during Occlumency with Potter, Snape had barely been able to conceal his rage at the stupid werewolf's carelessness.

But then the appearance of Potter's mysterious resolve in their last Occlumency lesson of the term had made him think again. He had decided it would be more prudent to turn Lupin's involvement to his advantage, even if that was only making sure Lupin kept Potter's mouth shut around Black. If he pushed Lupin too far away, there was the danger that the werewolf himself would go blabbing to Black, whimpering about the fresh loss of his friend.

So he would continue to make the Wolfsbane Potion, just as he had two years ago when he had thought it wise to keep Lupin close, and he would tolerate his need for inclusion, however grating it was that he took that inclusion for granted. But it would not come without limits. Lupin's disappointment when he'd set them out had been nauseating; it was as though he had been handed restricted visiting rights to a child or to a prisoner.

He wondered what Black might make of it all Lupin electing to spend time with his old enemy. But of course that was not how Lupin viewed him now; he knew it whenever he caught his eye. In fact, the consistency of it still managed to catch him unawares and draw him back to its meaning just when he'd succeeded in forgetting for a while. Damn that headmaster. It was simply Dumbledore's foolish insistence on letting the truth be known to those affected and blow the consequences. The Dark Lord, he realised, had been counting on just that.

He still could not comprehend what the Dark Lord was planning by letting this truth out he felt it was more than a mere test of his loyalties. Did the Dark Lord really think he would permit knowledge of this to affect him and give away his true role for Dumbledore? There seemed to be something else to all of this, and it was unnerving that he still

could not put his finger on what it might be.

He was pulled back to the present by the whiff of firewhisky. A glass was being brandished under his nose. Lupin was standing too close, and he was wearing that familiar, stomach-churning, look. 'Oh, come on, Severus. It's Christmas!'

Funny that Lupin believed this statement would make him more inclined to accept the proffered drink. But there remained the need to play to the werewolf's belief of being kept in the loop. He smiled grimly as he took it. If nothing else it might take some of the edge off.

At the sound of a book slamming, he was recalled to the presence of the Potter boy another reminder of his annoyance toward Lupin, this time because he now had to deal with the boy's continual prying since the werewolf had wagged his tongue. Still in the armchair by the fire, Potter was shifting uncomfortably under his gaze, the closed book on his lap. Clearly, Black was not the only one willing him to leave. In fact, it was Lupin's blatant lack of sharing that sentiment that bothered Snape the most.

He peered at the book the boy was gripping; he couldn't make out a title. 'Studying on Christmas Day, Potter? I had no idea you were so backward in your schoolwork that you feel the need to play catch up at a time such as this.'

'It's not a textbook. It's not a book at all.' Potter glared. 'If you must know, it's a photo album.' With a fixed gaze of defiance, the boy yanked the album back open.

He caught a glimpse of broomsticks held aloft, sweeping the inverted sky victoriously while a Quidditch cup glistened among a row of restless feet. Snape dared not pursue the subject. It was bad enough being forced to see a virtual replica of James Potter on an almost daily basis, but to have images of the actual one paraded in front of him filled him with cold dread.

Before he could stop himself, though, his infuriation had got the better of him. 'Make the most of it, since that will be the closest you will get to seeing your father again.'

The boy's head snapped up, revealing an expression of sheer horror. 'Why? What do you mean?'

Lupin piped up. 'Severus.' At least he had finally removed that smug grin.

'What does he mean?' Potter looked to Lupin, who promptly reinstated the smile, though not as confidently. 'Nothing, Harry, of course everything's ' he glanced up ' everything's fine isn't it, Severus?'

Snape hadn't actually given his remark much thought before he had said it. But now that he saw Potter had taken it to mean something had happened to his father, he found it quite a welcome surprise. However, the werewolf still needed pacifying. 'I merely meant it would be foolish to jeopardise an already precarious position in order to pander to the whims of a teenager.'

The boy seemed somewhat appeased. 'But after the war.'

Snape observed the untouched firewhisky as he swirled it around his glass. 'I suppose if he survives.'

'Severus!' Lupin caught his eye. 'May I have a word, please?' He gestured with his head to the door.

'He is all right, isn't he?' implored Potter of Lupin.

'Absolutely fine, Harry,' replied Lupin with conviction. He glanced at Snape.

A lecture from the werewolf a perfect way to round off Christmas. 'I'm not staying anyway.' He was about to get rid of the glass on a nearby table, but caught sight of Potter studying him anxiously. He hastily disposed of the contents first. 'Don't work too hard during your holiday, Potter. But I'm certain you won't.'

As soon as he was out in the hallway, Lupin began. 'Just what do you think you're doing?' He glanced back into the room; Potter remained hidden in the large chair, no doubt captivated once again by the photographs before him. The boy never did have a long attention span. 'I've done my bit,' said Lupin. 'I did what you wanted and I expect you to at least not toy with Harry's feelings for your own pleasure.'

'Believe me, pleasure is the last thing I am getting from this situation.' Despite this, he felt his lips quirk upwards the firewhisky was making itself known, lulling him with a pleasant glow that filled his empty stomach. He hadn't eaten since yesterday, before the Death Eaters' plans for Christmas had emerged.

'That doesn't give you the right to upset Harry.'

'It isn't my fault if the boy misunderstands.'

'Don't give me that. You knew exactly how he'd interpret it.'

'And tell me how I can answer his idiotic questions with any accuracy? You have succeeded in making sure it is impossible.'

'You said he'd never see his father again.'

'Well, isn't it true? The boy is labouring under delusions, thanks to you.'

'If you're so concerned about him being deluded, why don't you tell him the whole truth?' He checked his voice and Potter again, then pressed his forehead with his palm. 'This isn't a day for arguing.' While Lupin dealt with his headache, a knock from the kitchen followed by a screech, distinctly elven in origin, reminded Snape of Black's. Lupin looked up. 'Can't you at least try to spare a thought for his feelings?'

Perhaps it was the firewhisky, but Snape found himself in a mood somewhere between mock horror and amusement. 'Surely you don't suggest I lie to him? That the boy should be further deceived?'

Lupin appeared to sag. 'I don't know what else to do, as you insist on not telling him the truth.'

'Very well, then. Let's hope you don't make further slip-ups I refuse to correct more of them at my expense.'

This seemed to reinvigorate the werewolf. 'And how would it be at your expense if he knew the truth?'

The firewhisky in Snape's belly was showing its true colours and souring. 'You know what our naive little celebrity would think.' Not to mention the Dark Lord's little test, whatever the truth of that was.

Lupin stared as he filled the silence with a few angry breaths. 'He should be happy today.' He was nearing the end of his lecture. 'Christmas is a time for family.'

'No, he is not! I will not entertain it!'

When he thought about it later that day, he wondered at his outburst, and put it down to the sourness of the firewhisky and the werewolf's breath.

Lupin's head had already turned. Snape followed it and saw Potter standing by the chair, a hand on its arm, giving every impression he had heard his pronouncement. This time he had caught the boy in the act. 'Poking your nose in where it isn't wanted again, Potter? Prying into things you don't understand. One day it will be your undoing.' He held the boy's insolent gaze. 'Be careful you don't learn too much, and find no way of giving the knowledge back.'

'That's enough.'

Lupin's voice came from behind, and Snape stopped. He hadn't noticed he'd been creeping towards the boy.

'My dad is all right?' Potter was looking beyond him.

'He's fine, Sev... Harry.'

There was a time when Snape might have found the mistake amusing. But not even the firewhisky could stop the cold that fell over him now. Potter found nothing funny in it, either. He turned his father's features on him and arranged them into a glare of injustice. In the icy silence, Snape saw that the glass he'd left earlier was now next to him again. He had failed to empty it, and he took it from the table. So this was what Christmas ultimately came down to: wringing the last dregs in search of what? inspiration?

'Is he still here?' Black pushed past, Lupin at his heels. 'I don't remember saying you could help yourself, Snape.' He was already by the drinks pouring himself a fresh one.

'I gave it him.' Lupin's voice was low as though they were still in conference in the hallway. But Snape noticed it was less certain now, as if he was more afraid of Black than of him.

'Did you?' Having failed to stir Snape with his angry glare, he directed it at Lupin. 'Spending a lot of time at the school, lately, aren't you?'

Snape bit back a remark about Lupin's lost teaching job. Potter was making movements. His mind, as readable as always even without eye contact, was shifting from disquiet to a hushed impatience as he watched his godfather.

Lupin mumbled something about Dumbledore.

'Can't you talk with Dumbledore here?'

'Tired of being kept at bay, Black?' He was pleased to see Black got both meanings. It had him off the scent, at least. 'Finished sweeping up your meal?'

True to form, he emitted a low growl in reply. 'Bloody house-elf. I'll get my hands around his scrawny neck...'

'It doesn't matter.'

Snape watched Potter carefully. He was getting ready to make himself the centre of attention again.

The boy shrugged and made a feeble smile. 'I mean, I don't mind about dinner. Really. I'm happy just to be here with you and Remus. It's the best Christmas I've ever had, and there's nothing that can spoil it.'

Black seemed consumed with a sickening pride. Snape saw his glance at the chair next to Potter, where the photo album lay. Potter saw it too. And Snape knew then that the boy would tell Black. Not today. But he knew it, as sure as he knew Lupin would become a wolf at the next full moon.

'Dumbledore called through the Floo.'

'What? When?'

Black took a long drink as though he hadn't heard. He looked back as if surprised to find Snape still there. 'While I was in the kitchen. I said you wanted to see him at the school.'

'Tut, tut. And you have the nerve to accuse me of lying to him.'

This roused him. 'Of course you do! Dumbledore's mad to trust you!'

'I'll be sure to pass on your flattering remark.'

'Just go away, Snape. Dumbledore might be bothering some Ministry official on Christmas Day... That doesn't mean you can go around bothering people too.'

'Oh, but where's the pleasure otherwise?' He placed the empty glass on the table. 'Well, as enjoyable as this has been, I can't stand around chatting all day some of us have important matters to attend to.'

'That's right, you slither back to the snakes in your dungeons, Snape,' Black said as he was about to turn *Reformed*, eh? Hah! He downed the rest of his drink; he seemed already well on the way to inebriation. Snape didn't imagine there would be a happy Christmas dinner today in the Black house.

'Reformed, you say? Re-formed?' He should leave now, before he said too much. The firewhisky he himself had drunk was still tugging at the edges. But he found it difficult to pull away from the spectacle of Black deliberately ruining his first real Christmas in years. 'There is plenty I could say about that, Black.'

'Then why don't you, Severus?'

Snape shot Lupin a lethal glare. Funny how the werewolf had stirred only at his words. He sent a sneer around the room: at Black, his face red and not just from anger; at Lupin, now twitching pathetically with remorse and plainly searching for something else to say. And at Potter, the usual vacant look betraying the arrogant desire to tell all he knew to his dear godfather and damn the consequences. 'Happy Christmas.' He swept out of the room to the sound of silence.

## Delicious irony

*Chapter 6 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

'And I just think she's too young to go on these things.' Remus negotiated his way around a large flower, which seemed rather too interested in sniffing his robes, as he

followed Snape through the greenhouse. 'What do you think?'

Snape turned and almost knocked into him. 'I think the afternoon is getting on, Lupin,' he said with a glare before striding past. 'She said the Alihotsy cuttings would be in this greenhouse.' He went peering down another row with an impatient frown.

'Professor Sprout?' Remus waved his wand. *'Accio Alihotsy.'*

A basket rose up from beside a group of saplings dotted with tiny reddening fruit like pimples. Snape seized it as it flew over. 'Well, I suppose that will be enough,' he said after examining its green bounty.

Some movement down the far end caught Remus's eye. Three or four plants, huddled in a line, were hovering several inches off the ground and wriggling in their pots as though about to break free. He quickly cancelled his spell, and they fell back down, leaves rustling furiously as if rearranging themselves after their ordeal.

'Just look at how badly the Alysinnian shrivelfigs have been pruned,' said Snape at a cluster of bushes by his arm.

'The children have to learn.'

'The children have to learn dead wood must be removed if the plant is to endure.'

'Yes. Aren't they...'

Snape was already at the door and heading towards the vegetable patch. 'Secure the door, Lupin. There are Mandrakes in there.'

Remus tried again to engage him as he swept onward. 'I was just saying about the new Order member Nymphadora Tonks.' They climbed the stairs to the castle entrance. 'She is getting a lot of assignments.' He paused to hold open the door for a pair of students. By the time the fourth group of children had passed through with embarrassed mumbles of thanks, Snape was gone. Remus looked around and glimpsed his black robes sweeping down the steps to the dungeons. He hurried to catch up. 'I mean, I realise she's invaluable as a Metamorphmagus,' he said as they reached his office. 'But...' He backed away as Snape raised an arm and pointed a finger across him.

'Fetch that book,' Snape said as he carried on towards his desk.

'Don't you agree it's too many?' Remus picked up the book from the small table huddled by the wall. 'For a beginner?'

Snape frowned up at him distractedly. He looked down at the book Remus had deposited on the desk. 'What's this? Why have you brought me *Seventy-one Cures for Warts and All*?'

'I ...'

'That one.' He pointed a long finger, and continued to stare down it until Remus pulled out *Potions For The Perspicacious* from the shelf.

'So ...' Remus tried as Snape flipped through the pages.

'Let me see, let me see,' he muttered at a mass of scribbled lines down the margin. 'Is it possible ... a counterpoison within the poison?'

'Poison?'

Snape lifted his head and eyed him suspiciously. 'Doesn't Black need checking up on?'

'Well...'

Snape turned to study a heavily annotated diagram and put out a hand across the desk in the direction of three bottles. His fingers wrapped around the closest. But it didn't seem to be the bottle he had wanted he evidently expected it to be stoppered, as the other two were, because he brought it towards him so swiftly that a quarter of its contents had spilled across his robes before he looked up from the book. 'Damn it!' Something eel-like slithered down his front, leaving a track in the cloudy grey gunge.

He pulled out a cloth and wiped.

'Why don't you where's your...?' But Snape's wand was right there, poking from his pocket as he swabbed; and it occurred to Remus that he hadn't seen him use it once today. His wand had been there all along, while he, Remus, had been summoning and locking and fetching. But Snape hadn't just been trying to get rid of him there was something else going on here.

Snape was still trying to mop up the spill with the cloth and a deepening frown.

'Well, I ought to get going.'

Back in the entrance hall, Remus turned up the marble staircase. He found Dumbledore in the corridor outside his office, his travelling cloak on, talking to Professor Flitwick. He noticed Remus as he approached. 'Would you excuse me?' he said to Flitwick, who turned to Remus, nodded solemnly and departed without a word. Flitwick wasn't in the Order, but he knew Remus was, and took its aura of secrecy seriously. But Remus wasn't here on Order matters.

Dumbledore welcomed him with a warm smile. 'Ah, are you paying us another visit?'

'I need your opinion on something.'

Seeing his concern, Dumbledore steered him to a window. It overlooked the lawn far below somewhere to the left were the greenhouses where he and Snape had just been. 'It's probably nothing,' Remus said. He hoped it wasn't. 'It's Severus. He's he's not using his magic.'

He described what he had failed to notice while he had been chattering on. As he talked, Dumbledore's initial concern eased away little by little, until finally Remus could no longer ignore it. 'Something's wrong.'

'No, I don't think so.' Dumbledore was smiling outright now. 'Quite the opposite, I would say.'

'But ... he's weak, isn't he? Why else wouldn't he use his magic?'

Dumbledore turned a considered gaze on him. 'I'm sure you know the magical core resides in the soul? So you see, the magic is not quite his.'

'You mean it's ... James's magic? All of it?'

'That is a tricky one.' Dumbledore refastened his cloak, which had worked itself loose at his neck. 'Some magic comes from the heart as well as the soul.' He frowned in thought. 'I believe the Ministry still has a room devoted to the question.'

'But he's choosing not to use it? Isn't that...?' Snape wasn't here, but still Remus was loath to use the word foolish about him.

'It's simply a matter of comfort,' said Dumbledore as though he were explaining a choice in sofas. 'He finds it easier to reject this part of him sometimes.' His slight smile

was not directed at Remus.

'How can that be good?'

'Because rejection is better than denial. It is some kind of acknowledgement. And that is after all the first step to acceptance.' His eyes shone as he looked out across the school grounds. The January sky was a bracing blue.

'But he's rejecting James.'

Dumbledore turned back and regarded him, as though Remus's lingering concern were surprising. 'He's consciously electing not to use James's magic,' he said. 'For now. When he feels it's safe to do so. But in time this will make it easier, because he is asserting his control over it.'

'By not using it?'

'That will come.' He saw Remus's scepticism. 'But I think there is something else at play. The test, you see the test that was used to prove he does indeed have James's magical core. It involved the signature passed down by James.'

'Passed down? You mean like an inheritance?'

'Harry inherited something of his father's magic.'

Of course. All wizards did. He recalled Harry's Patronus, the subconscious manifestation of James's Animagus form.

'I'm afraid it was necessary to acquire some discreetly in order to undertake the test.' Dumbledore did not offer to explain how he had done this. Remus did not agree with all of his methods in everything, but neither did he envy his difficult position in the war with Voldemort.

'I see so it's Harry too? It's Harry he thinks he's rejecting too?' Remus remembered Snape's sudden protest at Christmas when he had seemed to read too much into his reference to family.

'This link to Harry the fact it was his magic that confirmed everything it's something more that must be accepted.'

'But he will he has to. He can't carry on like this. He'll get into trouble.'

'No, no. Not Severus.' Dumbledore's confidence returned. 'He understands control comes with use.'

'I didn't see that today.'

Dumbledore looked at him thoughtfully. 'But I think it is only with you because you understand.'

'Do I?' Remus didn't think he did understand all of this, not really.

Dumbledore saw his doubt; he smiled. 'Thank you for coming to me. But don't worry. He's simply distancing himself as his way of taking control. Severus won't let this affect him not when it's important.' He sounded certain; in fact he almost seemed cheered by Remus's news. 'First step to acceptance,' he said, and landed a confident hand on Remus's shoulder.

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Now unlocked, the paint-blistered door creaked open slowly onto the room as if caught in a draught. Shivering, Harry took a few steps towards the doorway, away from the shaft of light from the ceiling. The corridor beyond appeared swathed in darkness; there was no one there.

Suddenly, he felt a dull blow to his side as if he'd been elbowed...

Harry started, looking around. Next to him, Hermione was scribbling the last of her notes on Binns's History of Magic lesson, while the rest of the class were gathering their things and leaving. He rubbed his scar as the dream faded.

Casting him a reproving glance, she stuffed a hefty stack of parchment into her bag. 'You fell asleep again. Now, *know* it isn't just Professor Binns's class, because yesterday you did it in Professor Flitwick's class as well. So what's up? Aren't you getting enough sleep?' She peered in concern as he clawed at his scar.

At the front of the room, Binns's ghost left through the board as usual. Harry picked up his bag. 'It's this Occlumency,' he explained as he followed her into the corridor. 'I'm trying to practise, but it's really hard. I'm trying to clear my mind in classes, but then I end up falling asleep sometimes. It's just too relaxing you know?' He sighed. It seemed it was a fine balance between clearing the mind and dropping off altogether. Not that his pounding head let him do that very often these days.

'Well, just practise outside of classes, then.'

'I really need to do this, Hermione. I need all the practice I can get. I was so lazy with it last term. Voldemort could have found out about my dad already while I was just messing about.'

She had an 'I told you so' look on her face, but said nothing. She watched him scratch his scar. 'Is it hurting again?'

He pried his hand away in irritation. 'It seems to be making it worse the more I practise. Maybe I'm doing it all wrong.' He gazed miserably at the floor as they walked to Transfiguration.

They caught up with Ron on the stairs. 'I forgot to ask,' he said to Harry, 'did you tell Padfoot about Prongs?'

Harry was still getting used to referring to his dad by his old nickname. They had decided it was a sensible precaution, as they were already using Sirius's, in case they were overheard. 'No,' he said, 'I didn't get a chance. Lupin was there all the time.'

He didn't know when he would get another chance. But Occlumency practice was the most important thing right now. He kept it up for the rest of the day, successfully avoiding drifting off and breaking Hermione's concentration in class.

His headache finally released him from its grip at dinner just in time for the first Occlumency lesson of the new term. And he felt buoyed up again when, just half an hour into the lesson, he had managed to repel two of Snape's Legilimency spells in the space of a few minutes.

Snape, however, looked far from happy. He kept peering at his own wand after a spell had gone well (from Harry's point of view) when he thought Harry wasn't looking.

He seemed genuinely perturbed, but Harry was revelling in the feeling of achievement. It would only destroy the moment if he informed Snape it was down to the practice he'd been putting in since their last lesson the previous term. He felt his confidence growing each time Snape spent less and less time in his head.

Finally, after shutting Snape out with relative ease from a memory of yesterday's Divination, Harry recovered in time to see him putting away his wand. He peered at Harry from his usual place behind his desk. Between them sat the Pensieve he had filled earlier with his memories. 'We will continue this next lesson.'

Harry started and looked at the wall clock. 'But there's another twenty minutes left at least.'

Snape raised an eyebrow. 'Why, Potter, I had no idea you were having so much fun.'

Feeling himself reddening, Harry stiffened his gaze. 'Dumbledore thinks it's important I do this properly.'

'Indeed. That is why we will continue this next time. We will do it properly then.'

'What do you mean?'

Snape had turned to his desk; now he raised his eyes in a glare.

'What do you mean, *sir*?' repeated Harry.

Snape did not reply straight away. He seemed to be considering his answer, and Harry shifted impatiently as the black eyes studied him.

'I've been easy on you today,' he said at last, 'to aid you into getting back into it. I knew the absence of practice over the break meant we would have to start again from scratch.'

Harry knew this wasn't true; Snape had been doing exactly the same as before. In fact, he had been pushing harder into his mind since Harry had been finding it easier to repel him. Snape had never 'been easy' on him in his life. He felt like telling him this; that it was his own practising outside their lessons that had made it easier. But then he'd have to admit he'd never practised at all last term. Let the git stew, he thought.

But then, he considered, maybe Snape was wondering whether it was instead *him* who wasn't up to it with his Legilimency maybe that was why he wanted to bring an early end to the lesson? The thought calmed him down. There was something oddly freeing about getting one over on Snape.

If he was going to go for it, it was now. He chewed on his lip. 'What you said at Christmas,' he began. He had a bad feeling when he saw the beginnings of a sneer, but he pressed on. 'I just wondered ... if my dad's OK.' He braved Snape's condescending glare. Harry hadn't yet put away his wand, and he felt it grow slippery in his hand as he waited for Snape to goad him again into thinking his father was in some kind of trouble.

'He is fine,' said Snape at last in a flat voice. His mouth was squeezed as tightly as Harry had ever seen it.

Harry hadn't realised he had been holding his breath until his surprise at what Snape had said had died into relief. 'It's just that...' he said when he could speak again, and feeling he was now on a roll, 'I haven't heard anything. You know, like a letter or something.'

Snape's eyes widened. 'A letter?'

Harry's heart plummeted. He felt a stab of humiliation.

'You expect important work to be interrupted in order to write ~~letters~~'?

'Never mind.' He stared at a corner of the desk. He didn't want to listen to Snape's mocking when all he wanted was to see or hear from his dad.

But after a moment Snape moved, drawing Harry's eyes back.

'A letter can easily be intercepted,' said Snape, his appalled expression gone, replaced with his usual sour look. 'It would be dangerous and foolish.' Suddenly something blazed behind his eyes. 'Not that your father wasn't more than capable of bringing danger through his foolishness.'

Harry barely heard this last insult. His gaze fell. 'Of course.' He had known it would be too dangerous, but he had hoped that maybe... He lifted his head. 'If he gave it you, though. I mean, by owl might be risky, but...'

'Absolutely not!' Snape growled. 'I suppose you would like to endanger me by having such a thing discovered on me?'

Judging by the viciousness of Snape's glare, and the way his mouth was twitching, Harry knew it was no use pursuing the subject of correspondence. He sensed Snape would most likely throw any letters from his father on the fire anyway. 'He does ask about me, though, doesn't he?' he asked, feeling a lump forming in his throat.

Snape snorted. 'You really think there is the opportunity for mindless chitchat?'

Harry swallowed around the dryness. 'Forget it,' he mumbled and turned to go. He was at the door when he remembered something else; he turned back. 'Last term, sir. When you said my dad had forgotten about the Fidelius Charm. He forgot about that week? I mean, I know the Fidelius was done the week before, so whatever happened to him, it made him forget the past week?'

Snape's eyes were flaring again. 'Haven't I told you before I do not know what happened to him.'

'I know that. I'm asking about when he forgot how much did he forget?'

'A lot,' replied Snape swiftly.

'How much is a lot?' Harry pursued. 'A week a month, a year...'

Snape thinned his lips. 'Years, Potter, years.'

Harry felt the chill of shock. 'How permanent is it?'

Snape sneered, his cold black gaze fixed on him. 'Either something is permanent or it is not, Potter.'

'I mean, can he get it back somehow?'

There was something unsettling about the curl touching Snape's mouth. He seemed almost pleased with the question. 'No,' he said. 'Never.'

Harry stared without seeing him.

Snape turned away. 'I have things to do, so if you don't mind.'

Harry left Snape's office in a daze. Could it be true his dad had forgotten so much?

If it was, it would go some way to explain why he had heard nothing from him in all these years. He felt angry, and betrayed, that Lupin had not told him about this. Instead, he'd had to find out from Snape that his dad did not remember him, that his dad did not know him. He must have forgotten everything, everything that mattered his wife, his son, the reason he was a Death Eater spy.

The thoughts plagued him as he made his way to Gryffindor Tower, intent on clearing his mind so as not to lose the achievements he had made in Occlumency. It somehow felt even more important to practise hard.

A few yards from the portrait of the Fat Lady snoring fitfully over the quiet corridor he came to a stop. It was suddenly obvious why he had not heard from him not only did

his dad not know him, he did not even know Harry had learned he was alive. He still thought Harry believed he was dead. He did not know he was trying to protect him.

It was Snape that was preventing him from knowing, he decided as he watched the Fat Lady twitch in her sleep. Snape was his only contact in the Order; he was taking his dad's information to Dumbledore and giving nothing back. It seemed Snape wanted only to keep Harry and him apart.

Harry needed to let him know he was no longer alone. He wanted him to know he was doing Occlumency to keep him safe. He had to give him hope by showing him he was backing him all the way in every risk he was taking to bring down Voldemort.

He would not endanger him with a letter. But he had to do something.

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Snape gazed down into his glass at the crimson liquid glistening in the soft light of the fire.

He had not realised precisely how tense, how on his guard, he had been these past weeks these past months. Not until now, since his private audience with the Dark Lord half an hour ago in which he had been 'informed' of the Dark Lord's gift to him fourteen years ago.

It seemed he had finally passed his test when he had responded by confessing he had already been informed by Dumbledore some months earlier. It had, of course, been too trifling a matter for him to have bothered his master with. The Dark Lord had been pleased with this explanation.

'Ah...' sighed Lucius from the armchair nearby. He stretched out his legs toward the fire that pressed its heat into the cold Malfoy parlour. 'Just like the old days, eh, Severus the ball-and-chain out somewhere with her sister for the evening. No doubt spending more than a few Galleons in the process,' he added with a grimace. 'Detestable woman, Bellatrix,' he said, staring at the crackling flames as though he wished she were in them. 'All those years in Azkaban and she emerges even more self-important than before as if she's the Dark Lord's new favourite.' He shifted his attention from the fire. 'You won't tell Narcissa I said that, will you? She's rather fond of her dear sister.' He spat the familial reference with a particular sort of bitterness, with the supercilious edge only the Malfoys were able to achieve.

'Your secret is safe with me, Lucius,' replied Snape.

A mischievous smile touched Malfoy's lips. 'And yours with me, Severus.'

Snape surveyed him over his wine. 'What secret would that be?'

Lucius showed a few of his pearly white teeth. 'Do you think the Dark Lord would tell you and not me?' Grey eyes danced with the flames as he sipped his wine.

So he also knew. Snape held his gaze with an empty look. The Dark Lord had been talkative tonight.

'Oh, don't be so coy,' Lucius said, plainly misinterpreting the silence. 'The Dark Lord would not have gone to so much trouble for just any Death Eater. Not even for certain of the most favoured of us not mentioning any names.' He looked more alive than ever in the firelight; his face glowed with the wine he had drunk.

In acknowledgement of the compliment, Snape presented him with a modest smile.

'It could have been worse,' continued Lucius. 'The only people around to use could have been Squibs or worthless Muggles.'

*In that case,* reflected Snape, ensuring his thoughts were not reflected towards Lucius, *our pragmatical Lord would have simply left me for dead*

Lucius leaned towards him across the fire. 'You mustn't think anything of not being told sooner. I suspect it was my dear sister-in-law who placed doubts about you in his mind. What a shame I wasn't able to spare the gold to keep her out of Azkaban...' He lifted his eyebrows theatrically. 'But then,' he sighed, sitting back and drawing his eyes back to the fire, 'she and her sister are busy spending it now she is out.'

Snape gave him a moment to convert Bellatrix into ashes.

He turned back purged, beaming. 'But the irony! The delicious irony of your ... situation.' He did not seem to notice the irony of his describing it so benignly. 'I would have given a thousand Galleons to see the look on Harry Potter's face as he was told.' He laughed.

Snape offered up a more appropriate smile to Lucius's grinning face; it shared the joke on his behalf so that he was free to think.

But he had already realised from his audience with the Dark Lord earlier that it was assumed the boy had been told. What the Dark Lord did not know was that Dumbledore could be convinced to keep secrets as long as he in turn could keep his spy in the Dark Lord's circle.

'Were you there?' asked Lucius, eyes wide with eagerness.

'Unfortunately not. The old coot told the boy and me separately.'

'Ah, shame.' Lucius settled back into the plush armchair, perching his glass on his stomach. 'I have a Pensieve somewhere used to be my grandfather's. You could have shared the memory with me.'

Snape raised his eyebrows. 'Perhaps I would not have wanted to share such a treasured moment as that surely would have been.'

This sent Lucius into another happy fit. Wine rolled into waves as his belly shook. Removing his drink to the safety of the table at his side, he rested his head, blond hair spilling across the cushion, and gazed up contentedly. 'But think of the possibilities! I'm sure you already have?' He cast him a sly glance. 'The "boy who lived" is young, he's highly impressionable. Any well-deserved remarks you send his way would hurt him a hundredfold now.' He shook his head at him in awe. 'I know you've always wanted to make the brat's life intolerable, but this... You can really twist the knife in now, can't you?' His wild gaze betrayed the imagined scenes he was indulging in.

Snape watched his mind working. Perhaps it had been remiss of him, but he had not given thought to any such 'possibilities'. He had preferred not to think about the idea of the Potter boy knowing. But he had to admit there was a certain truth in what Lucius said. Potter was indeed far too forgiving when it came to his father, and taken in with romanticised notions of him. Snape found himself wondering whether he might have been too hasty in opting to keep this from the boy. Perhaps the awkwardness of the resulting situation would have had some compensations after all.

'The boy's father jinxed you about a bit, didn't he, at school?'

'He tried. He had a general feeling he was a cut above the rest of us.'

'So ' Lucius was pouring himself another glass and replenishing Snape's before he had a chance to object, ' the ultimate revenge, isn't it? Being forced to give life to you, whom he once considered beneath him, and now used as a weapon against his own son! Just priceless!'

Lucius was luxuriating in his own thoughts again. The grey eyes were on Snape but not seeing him. Snape fixed a smirk to his lips; the fresh wine hitting his stomach seemed to burn as strongly as the fire before them.

'Tell me,' said Lucius after a gulp of his own, 'did James Potter have any ... special abilities, do you know?'

Snape studied him. 'How do you mean?'

'Well, I'm sure he didn't, the arrogant prat.' He made a derisive noise. 'But ... well, any magical abilities he might have had could have been passed on to you.'

'I'm not sure I follow you, Lucius.'

'I mean, such as,' Lucius fingered his glass, frowning in thought, 'I don't know ... resistance to the Imperius Curse? One never knows when that may come in handy. Or some kind of interesting wandless magic, or...'

Snape snorted. James Potter's boundless arrogance would have nullified any chance of mastering even the most basic forms of wandless magic.

'...Animagus Transfiguration...'

Snape paused with his glass halfway to his mouth. He quickly took a sip before Lucius could notice him falter.

'...well, not that you'd know that anyway,' Lucius continued. 'Undoubtedly, he'd have been unregistered like Sirius Black. Keeping a low profile, that one, isn't he?'

'Dumbledore likes to keep his pets on a tight leash.'

'Still might be worth a try?'

Under Lucius's watchful eye Snape drew a careful breath. 'James Potter was a big-headed imbecile. His special ability was to spend every waking moment in childish attempts to gain the attention of his peers. Indeed, his biggest ability was to think himself special.'

Lucius grinned heartily. 'To the Dark Lord,' he said, raising what little remained of his drink. 'I would truly have missed your company, Severus, if it hadn't been for his timely and glorious intervention.'

Snape mirrored his movements as a show of gratitude for the sentiment. He only pretended to drink, nevertheless; the stifling heat of the fire was pooling with the alcohol he had already ingested and turning his stomach.

After Lucius freshened his own glass, Snape politely declined a refill. 'I regret I must get back. I have to rise early in the morning.'

Lucius rose from his chair with him. 'Dumbledore keeps you on a short leash, too, doesn't he?'

'One must keep up appearances, Lucius.'

If anyone empathised with that sentiment, it was Lucius Malfoy. The nod of understanding was brief, like an unwanted reflex. Snape registered his seeming reluctance with interest, but then the full Malfoy air was back. 'You know, I heard from a little bird you're giving the boy private lessons in Potions? I do hope you didn't think of it just so you could give the poor boy a hard time.' A playful smile tugged at his mouth.

'The boy is even more useless at Potions than his father was,' replied Snape, who surmised the little bird's name was Draco. 'It wasn't hard to convince that buffoon of a headmaster they were needed. Of course ' he gave Lucius a meaningful glance as he took a pinch of Floo powder from its container on the mantelpiece, ' I make sure my time is being well spent.'

Grey eyes gleamed with mirth. 'Oh, I'm sure you do, old friend. I'm sure you do.'

He spent the next day mulling over what Lucius had said. Some things had promise. He had no desire to work the big-headed imbecile's particular brand of vacuous magic. But there was one thing he could put into immediate practice: Harry Potter may not know the full truth, but the boy did know a half-truth he could use to his advantage.

The bane of his life at Hogwarts apart from the boy himself, of course was Potter's accessory in crime. Whenever mischief was caused, it was sure to be behind it, with Potter hidden within its folds. Ever since Dumbledore had foolishly presented it to the boy on arriving at the Castle, it had fallen to him to find a way of confiscating it from under the Headmaster's keen eye. Now he finally had the perfect way, he regretted not thinking of it sooner.

It did not help the boy's cause that it was the same article of clothing which had helped him to discover the half-truth in the first place. Because even if he'd had the presence of mind to place a soundproofing spell on his office door at the time of his and Lupin's talk, Potter would still have learned what he had. As long as the boy had his Invisibility Cloak, he would continue to believe himself entitled to sneak around unhindered.

But his dear father would be demanding its return now. Plainly, the Potter boy would be distressed at the thought of losing his prized possession. But as Lucius had said, the boy was impressionable, and his sentimentality for his idealised father would surely win out in any battle of the Potter egos.

It was with such pleasurable thoughts, looking forward to accosting Potter to put his plan into action, Snape dismissed the afternoon's third-year class. Perhaps, he reflected, gathering his notes after the last of the student rabble had left, he might even be able to find some use for the Cloak himself, as he had done a few years ago when he had surprised the little meeting with Black in the Shrieking Shack.

He cleared the board with a flourish of his wand, and turned.

Maybe he had been indulging too heavily in these imaginings, he thought, as his gaze fell on the very subject of his happy plans.

The boy was standing by the half-open door, holding the handle and peering around as though lost. Snape watched as he glanced back at the corridor and closed the door. He fiddled with his bag as he came clumsily forward through the tables. He was still rummaging inside it when he reached the desk.

'Potter. What are you doing?'

'Sir...' he said, putting Snape instantly on guard. At last Potter pulled something out. He brought it to the desk and raised an expectant gaze. Snape looked. It was a parcel.

'What is this?'

'It's... There's no note or anything.'

The cover appeared to have been torn from old wrapping. Snape saw the letters *thday* underneath the layers of blotchy parchment and hastily knotted string. It was not addressed. He lifted his gaze to the boy's guilty look.

Potter reddened. 'There's nothing traceable, I swear.' He shifted furtively. 'Can you... Can you please give it to him? To my dad? Sir?'

Snape did not say it immediately. He allowed himself an enjoyable moment to watch the doubt spread across Potter's face as it anticipated the refusal already playing on his lips.

But then he wondered. Though he had told him there were to be no letters or parcels, wasn't this exactly the sort of thing that would make Potter more amenable? If he indulged him, it might make it easier to bring further requests from his father certainly, turning him away now would make it more difficult to get him to hand the Cloak over later.

He foresaw the happy look on Potter's face, and stiffened. He reached for the parcel as he kept a close eye on Potter. It gave way beneath his finger. He prodded harder and watched the boy squirm satisfyingly. Still, it was not enough to compensate for what he was about to do.

He forced his jaw loose. 'If there is anything identifiable anything you will find yourself in a detention not even a memory charm will erase.'

Potter's entire body seemed suddenly to slacken. 'No ' he shook his head more vigorously than needed, delight writ large on the Potter features ' there's nothing, I promise.' The speed with which he took up his bag with an anxious eye showed plainly he knew how close it had been.

His mumbled thanks as he turned did nothing to lessen Snape's tension as he fought against the unnatural turn of events. He had to remind himself as the door banged and the boy could clearly be heard running down the corridor why he had done it. It would be worth it, once he had the Invisibility Cloak and he could relax knowing Potter could no longer pry unseen around the school grounds or even off them, as he knew he had done two years ago, floating head and all. He would give it a few days before beginning to convey demands from his erstwhile father.

First he had this thing to get rid of.

He worked through the options. He could just throw it away. But then, he considered, peering at the messy wrapping, whatever it was may be of some value materialistically speaking, of course.

Then again, he thought, jabbing it warily once more, it might be one of the Weasleys' gaudy knitted sweaters Potter was simply trying to palm off as a gift.

He removed his finger with distaste and wondered: What if there was indeed something identifiable within that would justify a pleasurable detention or two? He was sure he could find a scrap, if he tried.

He pulled the string with care as though it were concealing one of the Weasley twins' practical jokes.

Peeling back the shabby layers, he froze in recognition as the delicate silver material slid onto the table.

Damn the boy's insolence!

He slung the paper back around the Invisibility Cloak and gathered it up with his notes. So Potter thought he could gain the attention of his father this way? He strode into his office and tossed the offending item into his desk. The boy was an exhibitionist just like his arrogant father. He slammed the drawer shut.

## Too much

*Chapter 7 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

'No way!' cried Ron. 'I'm not letting them get away with that. They scared the hell out of ... er ... those first-years.' His expression shifted from angry to embarrassed before he recovered. 'And,' he added hastily, 'we can get them back, can't we, Harry, mate?' He grinned and put an arm around Harry's shoulder.

Harry shrugged him off.

'Aw, come on. It'll be fun. It'll be the opposite of what they did they've got Headless Hats, we've got ... er ... a Torso-less Cloak,' he ended lamely.

'Oh, I get it.' Ron's excitement was doing nothing to halt Harry's growing irritation. 'You want to use the Cloak to scare Fred and George with a floating head? That's pretty childish, Ron.' He picked up his pace down the corridor. 'There's more important uses for an Invisibility Cloak than silly things like that.'

Ron was staring at him as if he had just Transfigured into a toad. 'What's up with you? OK, just lend it me then. I'm getting them back if it's the last thing I do.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Look!' He met Ron's stare. 'I don't have it any more. OK?' He turned away angrily.

'What do you mean you don't have it any more?' asked Ron slowly. 'Where is it?'

Harry didn't reply straight away, but Ron clearly wasn't going to give up. 'I gave it to my dad ... Prongs,' he belatedly corrected himself.

'You saw him?'

'No, I ... I gave it to ... to Snape.'

He was afraid he would have to repeat himself, he had said it so quietly. Consequently, he hadn't had the chance to brace himself when Ron shouted in his ear.

'You did WHAT?'

Harry turned his reddening face on the curious glances being thrown at them as everyone made their way to the next classes.

'Of all the crazy things... D'you really think that git's gonna give it to your dad? You're nuts.'

Blood was rushing to Harry's head. 'Yeah? *Nuts* for wanting my dad safe? *Nuts* for taking the chance and anyway, what do I lose even if he doesn't give it to him? A stupid kids' toy, that's all it is here with me. At least I'll have tried.'

'Snape'll just use it for himself. That what you want?'

'It's all right for you,' said Harry, his patience slipping away. 'You know your dad's safe! I don't know anything ... no one tells *me* anything!'

'And that's another thing,' said Ron, apparently undeterred by Harry's rising voice. 'How come you've heard nothing from him yet? No letter or anything. You'd think...'

'Yeah,' Harry cut in. 'I suppose you're gonna say Snape won't let anything through. Been chucking his letters on the fire? Well, maybe it's because he doesn't want to contact me. How about *that*?'

He immediately regretted the remark. He had not told Ron or Hermione anything of what Snape had said about James losing all memory of his past and his family. He had not dared to listen to the niggling thought that had been forming since then. He could not blame his dad if he did not want to remember his past, what he had lost, what he had believed was lost perhaps it made it easier for him to do what he had to do now, to pretend to Voldemort, after what he had done to his family, that he was on his side it did not make it any easier for Harry.

'Don't be thick,' said Ron.

Thankful that Ron had not taken him seriously, he released a deep breath that took with it some of his frustration. 'Forget it,' he said. 'Come on, we've got classes to get to, and Hermione'll nag us if we're late.'

He was relieved to see Ron's worried expression change subtly at the thought of the impending scolding.

And he was glad Ron didn't bring the subject up again all day, and seemed to have forgotten the whole episode. He didn't feel in any mood to argue while trying to practise Occlumency during classes and breaks. And he was even happier when Ron said nothing to Hermione about it. Another argument with her would be even worse than one with Ron.

But he did regret handing the Invisibility Cloak to Snape. Once he had thought of giving it to his dad, he had wanted him to have it straight away. Why couldn't he have waited a few more days? Monday had seemed to come around again faster than he had imagined it would. He'd had all weekend to take in just what a stupid idea it had been to give it to Snape to pass on.

In the evening, Snape gave no indication he had done so yet. Harry did not dare to ask. It was difficult to deflect Snape's Legilimency spells with it on his mind. His head was pounding again. As Snape withdrew, he clutched his scar. His hand was damp with sweat.

'Poor effort today, Potter. I hope you're not using a little headache as an excuse?'

'No, I'm not. It hurts more when I practise.'

Snape had gone quiet. Harry looked up or rather squinted as much as his throbbing head would allow to see Snape had narrowed his eyes. 'Explain.'

'It's just the scar.'

Snape paused. 'When?'

'When I practise.'

'So ' Snape drew a finger over his thin mouth as he studied him, ' so before sleep?'

'And in classes.'

Snape stopped. 'What classes?'

'All of them.' Harry shuffled to a chair. His head eased a little as he sat. At least his eye sockets weren't on fire any more he was thankful for once Snape's office was as gloomy as it was.

He felt Snape's gaze flitting over him. 'When else do you practise?'

Harry shrugged. 'At meals. In between classes.'

Snape was staring openly. 'When do you not practise?'

Harry stayed silent. It was clear from the way Snape was glaring at him as though he were doing something wrong that he was gearing up for a petty argument.

'You expect me to believe you are doing all this, when last term you did nothing?'

Harry didn't care what Snape did or did not believe. 'It's important. That's what you said before Christmas.'

'It has been important from the start. Nothing has changed.'

'You said Voldemort could read my mind he could find out about my dad through me.'

'Do not say the Dark Lord's name! The pain in your head should be warning enough!'

Harry glared back as he waited for Snape to calm down.

'Your head must not hurt all the time, because you would stop.'

'No ' Already Harry was feeling the first twinges of reflexive anger Snape usually inspired in him. 'No, I don't because it's important.'

Snape looked dubious. 'So let's see if I have this right. You practise all day, morning, afternoon and every night before sleep. And your head hurts each time. And you carry on?'

'Yeah.' Harry held his cynical gaze. He resented the continuing insistence he was lying, particularly about this, and especially coming from Snape. 'Yeah, I do.'

'Even supposing this is true ' He ignored Harry's glare ' did it not occur to you how foolish it is to test your link to the Dark Lord?'

'Isn't that the whole point of it? To stop him using the link?'

'You're overdoing it, Potter. Far too much.'

'How can I overdo it? It was you who told me to practise. Now you're saying it's too much?' Snape was obviously trying to make a big deal of it as an excuse to give him a hard time. 'Can't you make up your mind?'

'Is it that which hurts the most?' Snape's eyes were boring into his scar as if it was about to spring to life.

'How can I be overdoing it?' Harry repeated, as much as anything in an effort to ignore the creepy way Snape was staring at his head.

But silence had descended. Harry wondered if Snape had heard him. He had emptied his gaze, and for a few long moments it remained that way. Eventually he said as though coming to a decision, 'It seems the link you share with the Dark Lord is having adverse effects when you attempt to close your mind so frequently. Besides the adverse effects on your concentration in classes,' he added with a glare. He frowned. 'Your age may also be a factor your mind is young and vulnerable. You simply do not

need to practise so deeply and so often.' His mouth twisted into a sneer. 'Why is it from one extreme to another with you, Potter?'

'Because I don't want Voldemort to know what I'm thinking!'

'I told you not to speak his name!' he spat through yellow teeth. 'Now as for the possibility of the Dark Lord knowing your thoughts I don't believe it exists.'

Harry sat up. 'Why? You said before that...'

'I'm aware of what I said.' Snape regarded him calmly. 'However, some information has since come to light that gives me reason to believe he cannot know your thoughts.'

'What reason? How do you know he can't?'

'It is enough that I know.'

It was clear Snape would not explain, no matter how many times Harry asked. He felt himself tense up again. Why didn't anyone tell him anything?

'Besides,' Snape went on, 'what is there in your brain the Dark Lord could find so useful? Please enlighten me on what could be so devastating if he discovered it in the ... depths ... of your mind.'

'Weren't you listening?' Harry was gripping the seat of his chair. No one seemed to listen to him any more. Dumbledore was away at the Ministry all the time trying to convince them of Voldemort's return. Lupin always had somewhere else to be when he saw him at the Castle. And they had refused to let him into the Order. 'I told you I don't want Voldemort to find out about my dad. I don't want him to find out he's risking his life to spy for us.'

He thought Snape would pull him up on the name again. But then his black eyes narrowed and his lip began to curl. 'I see,' he said at last. 'First that ... parcel. And now this. I've already made it plain. There will be no meetings, no letters so I suggest you give up this childish attention-seeking.'

'Don't you get it?' Harry shouted, his anger getting the better of him. 'I'm not doing this to get his attention!'

'Do not raise your voice to me, unless you want Gryffindor in negative figures this year.'

'I don't care about stupid bloody points.'

'Ten points from Gryffindor for foul language.'

Harry stared at a corner of the table. If it were not for all the practice he was doing outside their lessons, he knew he would have found it almost impossible to put aside his hate enough to repel as much of Snape's Legilimency as he was managing to do. He turned his indignation back to him. 'Haven't you ever wanted to do whatever you could to make sure someone you cared about was safe?'

Snape's face was like stone. When he spoke his voice was almost a whisper. 'You are to stop this. Only fools wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves. You are handing yourself over to be crushed like a fly.'

'But I know it's working!'

'SILENCE! You will listen to me!' He seemed suddenly consumed with fury, his face contorted like a crazed animal. But Harry's anger permitted only fleeting shock. 'You are not to continue with these attempts beyond what you were told.'

Harry made himself take several breaths before speaking. 'Fine,' he said between gritted teeth. He met Snape's rage; he had no intention of discontinuing anything.

'By next week,' said Snape when he had composed himself, 'I want you in a better position to resist me properly. As you are now, you are utterly useless.'

Harry stood to leave; together with the pain in his head, the frustration and anger he had been building toward Snape seemed to propel him from the chair.

'Do only what I told you to do,' he heard Snape say as he left. 'Clear your mind every night before sleep and no more, you understand?'

Harry understood all right. He understood they all thought he was still just a kid trying to get attention. Nobody ever took him seriously in his efforts to be a responsible adult. He had never been able to drive back Snape's attempts to get further into his head as much as he was lately, and it was rare he found himself reacting reflexively with Stinging Hexes and the like as he had done at the start.

He would not stop now, when he was achieving so much. They would see he was no longer the kid they believed him to be.

-X-

He rarely had breakfast, and he had not seen Potter at lunch. But at dinner Snape scanned the Gryffindor table, and spotted the full dream team halfway down its length.

There was Ronald Weasley chatting with the know-it-all Miss Granger; and next to Weasley sat Potter, contemplating his food. If the boy was not meditating on his steak, he had better be ruminating on what new levels of greatness he had reached today. Because otherwise, he was plainly trying to do exactly what he had been warned not to.

Miss Granger had turned to draw him in to the chat. She looked annoyed to find he was not listening to her; a well-placed elbow signalled her irritation. Potter flinched. And it was cartoon-like in its exaggeration. Miss Granger's face burned red while Potter fumbled across plates to retrieve the fork that had leapt clean out of his hand. He was saved by a wave of mirth as Lavender Brown pulled globs of his mash from her hair.

Snape looked to his side as he made a move with his own fork. Everyone at the staff table was engrossed in talk or their meals. If things carried on as they were, though, it would only be a matter of time.

Just the other day Dumbledore had asked him in passing to try not to overwork the boy. He had dismissed the remark. Potter was no packhorse. But after the boy's little admission yesterday, he was beginning to understand. Clearly one or other teacher had been speaking to the Headmaster.

'I hope you aren't giving Potter too much work to do, Severus,' said Minerva next to him. Flitwick had quit her side, leaving her deprived of conversation. 'The poor boy has enough on his plate.'

'Yes, I imagine being a celebrity is a full-time occupation.'

'I am Head of his House, Severus and I've received expressions of concern. Potter has been noticeably distant in classes, even visibly in pain.' She turned her gaze down the hall with a frown. 'Even now he doesn't appear altogether present. Does this have anything to do with the private lessons you're giving him?'

'Potter has to learn.'

'Not at the expense of his schoolwork. It doesn't matter how good an Occlumens you are if you can't even Transfigure your way out of a jam.'

'I've told him not to overdo it. He is insistent.'

'Well, he must be commended at least for putting so much effort in. I wish he showed the same enthusiasm for the rest of his education. But you must try harder to convince him. I'm sure Dumbledore would agree.'

Snape caught the hint. Mercifully Dumbledore was away at the Ministry again. 'Regrettably,' he said, forcing his voice to reassurance, 'I did not learn he was going to such lengths until just recently. He must have misunderstood my original instructions. I have set him straight, but of course it will take him a little time to shake off the habit. Meanwhile, I shall continue to keep an eye on him.' That was exactly what he now had to start doing, he realised as he stared down the Gryffindor table.

'So shall I,' said Minerva, and she took her leave.

He watched Potter continue to take in slow forkfuls of food. If news of the levels of his idiocy reached Dumbledore, the Headmaster might take matters into his own hands he might take Potter's attention-seeking seriously and try to persuade himself the boy should know the full truth about his father. Snape worked his food as he looked on. The one thing he had learned from his recent audience with the Dark Lord was that he believed completely that Potter knew everything. If the Dark Lord could really intrude into the boy's mind at will, he would have discovered otherwise long ago. Plainly, then, though some Occlumency was warranted as a precaution against their curious link, these excesses were entirely not.

He could not deny that he himself had years ago found a deeper satisfaction in Occlumency as he had practised more strictly and increased his skill in the art. He had triumphed over the emotions that had tried to take hold of him.

But Potter was younger than he had been then, and there had been no magical link to the Dark Lord to cause complications.

Of course, the boy believed he knew best, just like his father. He would end this stupidity soon enough on realising his pathetic exhibitionism was getting him nowhere, when he understood his dear fatuous father would not be rushing to his side to congratulate him for such asinine behaviour. But another trait of his father was stubbornness in his self-assuredness, right to the end. Snape could not wait until then. He needed to keep this from Dumbledore. He needed to make the boy see sense.

The others around Potter were leaving the table. Potter reluctantly got up; he had barely made an impression on his plate, from what Snape could see. Was the boy so arrogant as to believe he could make great strides in Occlumency on an empty stomach? He concentrated his stare on Potter's unreadable expression as the boy trailed after his chattering friends. He would not dare to do something so reckless in his class would he?

The next morning he got his answer.

When he knew Potter thought he was not looking, he glanced up from the mess in Longbottom's cauldron, and caught him plainly at it. His brainless friends had not noticed a thing. Or perhaps they were used to the thin sheen of sweat on Potter's forehead and the vacant gaze.

'Sir?'

He turned his wrath toward the source of the small voice and saw Longbottom's eyes widening with terror under his glare. He sent it to the boy's supposed Befuddlement Draught. 'Get rid of it, Longbottom. I wouldn't give that shambles to a toad.' The boy made a sound like a whimper and dropped his wand in his haste to clear the potion before his absurd pet could be made to suffer the effects of his handiwork.

Snape returned his attention to Potter who quickly averted his gaze and as he did a spasm seemed to run through him. His eyes screwed shut and his hand flew halfway to his head, before he stopped it and forced it down.

Snape strode across. 'No marks again, then, Potter,' he said as the fumes from the wretched potion reached his nostrils. *Evanesco.* He breathed in the freshening air over the emptied cauldron. 'Feeling ill, Potter?' He held the boy's sheepish gaze for a moment, making sure he registered his disapproval. 'Hardly surprising, with that abominable stench you managed to create.' Some sniggering broke out behind him, and Potter reddened. Snape turned to the class. 'Settle down, everyone. The properties of Befuddlement Draughts and Confusing Concoctions,' he said as he made his way to the front, 'often come up at Ordinary Wizarding Level. I want an essay from each of you detailing the composition, the effects and what you did right today.' he looked around at Longbottom 'and wrong.' Longbottom dropped his eyes. 'And why. To be handed in the next lesson.' He ignored the collective groan. 'Bottle and label your potions and bring them forward. Clear your places before you leave.'

He took his seat and looked beyond the flurry of students and through the first hasty deposits on his desk. Over the growing line of glass vials misty from still-hot potions, he saw Potter leaning on his schoolbag, appearing for all the world as though he was about to take a nap in his class.

Potter had already earned a detention he would take great care to shake the boy's arrogance from him fully this time.

He considered the finer points beneath the prattle and the clink of glass as he looked on through the steady movement around him, until he became conscious of a stationary figure at its edge. Draco had placed his potion alongside the others, and was now gazing at him with a curious expression. 'Is there a problem, Mr Malfoy?'

Draco blinked, appearing to have only just realised he had met his eyes. 'No, sir.' He smiled. 'No problem at all.'

He returned to his desk, and Snape watched him clear it. His smile had reminded him of one of Lucius's disquieting smirks. The boy seemed to be becoming more and more like his father every day.

Which reminded him.

'Potter! Stay behind.'

-X-

It was the same gloomy, mouldy room of Harry's recent dreams. He turned to his right as usual and saw the door ajar.

Pushing carefully so it did not creak on its rusty hinges, he took two tentative steps through the doorway and into the empty corridor. The décor was just the same here peeling greenish-grey wallpaper above musty wainscoting. And just as in the room behind him, a weak light was straining to reach the dirt gathered at the wall and lining the floorboards.

There were muffled voices coming from somewhere down the corridor. Harry was moving toward them, and before long found himself standing in front of a closed door where the voices were strongest. He leaned in to hear them better.

'...only antidote's Antisanisee,' a man said.

Harry heard a heartless laugh in reply. 'Shame he won't be able to run along and find any in time...'

'Antisanis...'

'Oi!'

Harry lifted his head and squinted into Ron's worried face.

'Mate, you fell asleep.'

'What?' Harry rubbed the side of his face. It felt as though something painful had been pressing into it, something shaped very like the buckles on his schoolbag. He rearranged his glasses and touched his tingling scar; his headache was hanging around. Sitting about in here was not helping the room was still heavy with heat from

brewing potions. He got up, making an effort to shake off some of the drowsiness.

It seemed Hermione had already left for Arithmancy. But he couldn't have drifted off for more than a few minutes if anything there was more of a bustle and clatter as the last of the ingredients and equipment were being tossed hurriedly into cupboards. He peered around the darting figures to the front of the class. 'You don't think Snape noticed?'

'You were saying some weird stuff,' said Ron, picking up a book from the floor.

'Was I?'

'Something about your Aunt's sore knee.'

'I remember ' He concentrated on what the people in his dream had said ' Antisanisee.' Hadn't they called it some kind of antidote?

'Yeah, that sounds like it. What's it mean?'

'How should I know? It was just a dream. Doesn't mean anything.' It had been the same room again. Why did he keep having these dreams about a strange room? 'You ready?' he asked as Ron stuffed another book in his bag. He could not wait to get out of the dungeons for some air.

'You sure you're up to it? Why don't you just skive off Divination? You could do Snape's essay instead.'

Their usual seats at the back were only a few steps from the door, and Harry was already beside it when he heard Snape.

'Potter! Stay behind.'

Ron gave him a sympathetic shrug. Harry had little choice but to stand by as Ron left with the last few Gryffindors.

-x-

'Sit.' Snape moved to the classroom door and carefully closed it.

'I've got Divination...'

'I wouldn't care if you had an appointment with the Dark Lord himself, Potter.'

Harry dropped his schoolbag onto the nearest desk and sat.

'So. It appears you are, predictably, ignoring my instructions.' Snape remained standing and looked at him down his hooked nose. 'Perhaps I was not clear enough on how much Occlumency practice you are to do? Was I, Potter?'

'You were clear. But you don't understand...'

'Oh, I do. I believe you are enjoying it. You are once again the centre of all attention the place which gives you greatest pleasure.'

Harry stared at a pile of clean cauldrons stacked against the wall. He would not take Snape's bait.

But Snape was not giving up so easily. 'But perhaps you think you know better than me? You are an expert in Occlumency, you understand how to control...'

'I know what I'm doing is right.' He glared at Snape's lack of concern. But how could Harry expect him to understand? Snape didn't give a damn about his dad's safety but at least Snape knew whether or not he was safe. 'You don't know what it's like.'

'No, I didn't have the privilege of growing up a celebrity. How vexing it must be to discover somebody has not been showering you with the attention you plainly deserve.'

'He's not just someone. He's my dad.'

'Which makes it all the more important that you get his notice. He is, after all, the standard by which you set yours.'

Harry twisted the strap of his bag in his hand. He felt faint from the closeness of the dungeon air and the blood rushing anew into his aching head. He could barely think after the particularly challenging few days he'd had trying to concentrate on Occluding his mind. It seemed the more he tried, the more light-headed and nauseous he was from the headaches, and the more difficult it became to focus. And when he did open his mind again, it was taking longer to pull his thoughts together after practising all yesterday lunchtime, he'd had to stay behind in the dormitory for several minutes so anyone trying to start a conversation in the common room wouldn't think he'd been replaced by an inarticulate robot.

'You will not succeed,' said Snape. 'Believe me. You will not gain his undying gratitude. There will be no words of pride or praise.'

'You don't get it.'

'But I do, Potter. You are no longer satisfied with the blinkered admiration of your peers, of the imbecilic reporters at the *Daily Prophet*. Your father would have relished it all, but you are growing bored already it seems. What is it, Potter? Not getting enough column-inches lately? Your popularity waning?'

'I'm not doing this to get his attention. I'm not doing it to get anyone's attention!'

'That is just as well, because trust me you are his last concern. Now sit back down.'

Harry was only aware he had got out of his chair by the start of Snape's words gave him. 'Because he doesn't know me?'

'Oh, he knows you, Potter. He knows you only too well.'

Harry studied the sneer. 'What have you been telling him?'

'What's to tell? Everyone knows you take after him exactly. But perhaps,' he said quietly when Harry made no move to reply, 'perhaps he *should* be informed about this he would be genuinely proud of this stupidity. Especially when it lands you in the hospital wing or worse.' Snape's black eyes were keen, calculating. 'Is that what you would like? Do you want him to pay a visit to your sickbed in St Mungo's?'

Harry's head was light. He felt he might drown in the sheer determination of Snape's disinterest in James's welfare. The torchlit walls around him were falling back he didn't feel safe standing but he would not sit down. 'I want to make sure my dad's safe.'

'Don't we all.'

The distance in Snape's cold gaze suddenly felt real; he was no longer within arm's reach. Harry knew he would not be able to change Snape's view he was dreaming he had fallen asleep in class again, and someone was talking. 'What's that supposed to mean?' It was his voice, but they weren't his words. His words were someone else's, and Snape was voicing his reply when he finally heard them. 'You don't need to pretend he'd even do that.'

There was a frown on Snape's pale forehead. 'Do what?'

'Visit me in St Mungo's.'

'Really?' Snape's emotionless voice fell away uselessly.

'Because I know he's got his own life a new life.'

A strange, almost satisfied expression was forming on Snape's face. 'True, Potter. Very true.'

It was like a wave of relief.

His friends still did not know about James's memory loss. They would simply confirm what Harry had been suspecting. But here was someone who did share that knowledge, and he was confirming it. Harry had been dreading it; but now that his suspicions were fact, all he could feel was the numbness of release.

'I thought he was dead anyway. I'm just glad he isn't like Lockhart.' He saw Lockhart's vacant expression as he had been carted off to St Mungo's.

Snape was speaking again something about him ending up in the bed next to Lockhart if he didn't listen to him.

'You don't need to pretend he ever talks about me that way like I'm his son. Because I know I'm not any more. Not the way he sees it.' There was a feeling of loss, but determination, and a sad sort of happiness not for him, but for his dad. The emotions were coming from somewhere, but he didn't know where to put them. 'Why wouldn't he want to get away from his past? He can't remember it, and why would he want to, with everything that's happened? I don't blame him. In fact I envy him.' Was that a new one? Where did that one belong? 'I'd give anything to do what he's doing to have the opportunity to make a difference without everyone knowing my name everywhere I go. No more staring or pointing just because of who I am. If I could make a fresh start away from all that, I'd jump at the chance. I'd take it and why shouldn't he? He doesn't remember who he was, so why shouldn't he?' That one seemed to have been dealt with. He turned to the next one in line. 'But I do have the responsibility it was my fault I found out he's alive and a spy it's all my fault. And Voldemort is not going to find out that he or anyone else is a spy from me.'

He had reached the end of the line. There was something deeply calming about the silence that followed. Everything was in its place not because he had forced the thoughts and feelings to go where he chose, as he was used to doing lately but because he had allowed them to find their own paths.

So they had left him here.

He was still in the dungeons, in the Potions classroom.

And Snape was still looking at him. Harry felt the first shudder of panic, as though he had just landed here by Portkey. He remembered how badly he needed fresh air; the room was still laden with potion fumes. Snape was standing only a few feet away; if he put out a hand he could have touched him. He would be completely helpless if Snape chose to test his Occlumency now.

What was the point of all that practice if he couldn't control himself at other times? And to Snape, of all people.

Oh, God Snape!

Now Harry did hear the thud of his heart and taste the tang of adrenalin. It was, as usual, hard to tell what Snape was thinking. Harry needed air more than ever. He would have to skip Divination after all, just to clear his head and he needed to clear it before he could make a start on tonight's Occlumency practice. A brisk walk to the lake might do the trick; it had worked the other day when he'd needed to get away for a bit.

'So I'm late for Divination.'

Yes, the lake, he thought as he left the room without looking back. Don't think about what Snape might be planning to do with all the ammunition he had just given him. He looked forward to reaching the lake and getting back to focusing on his Occlumency.

## Choices

*Chapter 8 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

'Is it prison visiting hours again so soon?'

'What?' Remus closed the door behind him. 'Well, perhaps if you ventured out of these dungeons more often...' He made a show of peering around, eyebrows raised, at the windowless room.

From the shadows by the wall Snape looked up from the cauldron he was stooped over. His sharp glance said they both knew what Snape had meant. But Remus wasn't about to humour him. Snape straightened and began chopping something using the knife Remus hadn't seen him holding.

Amid the decisive tap-tap-tap, Remus took the usual seat. He had learned by now it was pointless waiting to be asked. 'I don't know how you can do that in this light.'

Snape made a soft noise. 'Extraordinary how one gets used to dwelling in the dark.'

'But one can grow so accustomed to it, one becomes afraid of the light.'

'Are you here simply to talk in thinly disguised metaphors?'

'Well, it makes a change from Sirius's more blunt remarks.' Remus's smile was lost in the dimness as Snape gathered up what he had been cutting. He deposited the root-like objects into a jar, carried it to a shelf, and returned to study the cauldron.

Now Remus's eyes had adjusted to the more than usual gloominess of the room, he saw the delicate white haze. It swirled from the brewing potion and glimmered as it

rose in the soft light before edging into the shadows.

'You might as well know. The Dark Lord has told me.' Snape had moved to the side. The light caught a jar of knotweed he was holding up to examine.

'He told you what he did to James and you?'

'Not the details, of course. And not why he has decided to tell me now. He is satisfied I think nothing of it because I had not thought it worth mentioning I already knew from Flintoff's capture.'

'Well I suppose that's something of a relief for you.'

There was a clunk as Snape put down the jar. 'He believes Potter knows.'

'Harry? But is that a problem?'

'Not for me, certainly. The Dark Lord wants Potter to know the truth. Why? Is it for more than to simply hurt him emotionally?'

'To hurt him?'

'But the Dark Lord doesn't know him. Potter would revel in the truth.'

'Sounds like you don't know Harry, either.'

'I've known the boy longer than you.'

'But how well do you really know him?'

Snape had picked up a stirring rod; he lowered it slowly into the cauldron and seemed to use the moment.

'You see him as James.'

Snape's head moved swiftly in reply. Under the dark stare, Remus felt suddenly small, like a child in the Potions master's class who had scored badly for the twentieth time in a row.

Snape had a way of highlighting stupidity without needing to say anything. Remus had first tasted it while a student at Hogwarts when, for some reason he had long forgotten, he had been left behind after one of James and Sirius's bouts with Snape.

As then, Remus glanced away from the accusation.

This time, he turned right back again. 'There's nothing he can do to hurt Harry. Except keep the truth from him.'

Snape sensed the victory despite his words. 'Really? Do you suggest, while I'm at it, I should fill him in on some important details about his dear father's past you and Black no doubt failed to mention?'

'You know stories are just that.'

'Precisely. It is always the truth that hurts.'

Remus looked with curiosity at his bitterness. It seemed to run deeper than he had thought, into some gully he did not recognise. 'Not always.'

For a long moment Snape held his gaze; it was lengthy enough for Remus to begin to wonder, his heart quickening, if he might be seeking to shape some of that depth into words. But then it was broken before Remus could discern anything. Snape's attention was back on the cauldron. And beyond the curtain of lanky hair, Remus saw him reassert his usual reticence.

He understood why Dumbledore had chosen to tell him Remus was someone for Snape to confide in, someone who had known James but did not hold great prejudices against Snape. He supposed he was 'neutral' in that respect, and he imagined he should take that as a compliment. But it was also a painful reminder of his deliberate neutrality at school when he had turned aside from his friends' more unpleasant games.

He found he was often disturbed from the simple joy of knowing his old friend had not gone completely, by wishing Dumbledore had told someone else instead. Minerva McGonagall perhaps. She would have known what to say and wouldn't have minced her words about it either. If only Dumbledore could spend more time at Hogwarts instead of at the Ministry trying to convince them Voldemort had returned. But Remus suspected his selection as Snape's confidant was also due in no small part to his lycanthropy, which even today he had to keep reminding himself wasn't the true him.

He sat up in the hard chair. 'When my friends finally found out I was a werewolf I can't tell you what a relief it was.' He struggled to see if this was having any impact. 'It's been months, Severus. The longer you leave it, the harder it will be I know. I became more and more afraid of being discovered as time went on. But their reactions couldn't have been more different to what I'd feared. Look at *me* is it so bad that I know?'

There was no reply. He saw a powdery substance fall from Snape's hand into the cauldron.

He hated lying to Harry. Snape would have to tell him the truth one day, and it would be far better sooner rather than later. But he was at a loss as to how to persuade him. Snape was a master at hiding himself from others this, to him, was no different. But he was hiding so much more than just himself this time, and Remus felt a twinge of anger. 'James would not want this.'

Snape's eyes were on him. 'Is that so?' His mouth twisted into an ugly shape. 'Why don't you ask him?'

Remus held his gaze despite feeling the blood in his head betraying him. He shouldn't have given in to his anger. But that did not make Snape right. 'You're forgetting it wasn't just you who had no choice in what happened.'

'Him!' said Snape wildly. 'It is always him!' Although his fury subsided, Remus noticed his jaw remained clenched. 'And choices. What about those?' He looked back at the simmering potion. 'You know about choices, werewolf? Does choosing to turn from those who could have been saved damage the soul?'

The silence fell like a weighted curtain. The implication was obvious, and Remus felt the blood desert him just as swiftly at being thrust into unfamiliar territory. Death Eater territory.

'Dumbledore is so fond of choices.' Snape's voice was distant; he was speaking to himself from beyond the gulf he had opened. 'But what choices do I have now? My soul mine what chance is there for me to heal it now?'

Remus fixed his eyes on the hard desk and unwillingly found himself wondering how far Snape had gone over the years.

'And has it affected my judgement?'

'How do you mean?'

Snape pulled a sour face. 'I've had an undamaged soul all along.'

'We all make our own choices.' Remus said it almost automatically. But he wondered about his own sincerity. Because where really did James end and Snape begin?

Snape was sneering at the obvious regurgitation of one of Dumbledore's pronouncements.

'But really,' said Remus, pushing on, 'how do you know your soul is not being healed? I've always thought the normal rules don't apply ... wherever it is. None of us know how all this is supposed to work.' He certainly didn't. Was Snape James with Snape's body and Snape's memories? That was how Remus thought of it. How simplistic, and complicated, it seemed. Snape did not appear to have heard. Remus breathed deeply. 'Do you know anyone who does?'

Another uneasy moment passed, and then Snape dipped his head and moved the stirring rod. Remus felt its renewed motion steering them back into easier waters.

'What was his Patronus?'

The shadows of the last subject had not yet retreated, and Remus did not feel comfortable speaking about James. But how stupid that was. James was right here. 'I don't remember there being one. Not a fully formed one...'

This seemed to bring Snape back. His mocking glance evaporated any trace of lingering tension. 'Really?'

Remus felt a sudden duty to defend him. 'James was only what twenty-one when he...' He considered how best to phrase it. Not died, as such. Passed on?

But Snape was still thinking. 'So he wasn't able to produce a full Patronus,' he said as though Remus had confirmed it. 'It doesn't surprise me at all.'

'I didn't say that.' He thought about mentioning Snape's Patronus or lack of. Snape always used other methods of communicating with them in the Order, ostensibly to preserve his spy status. 'I simply said I couldn't remember witnessing it. Why do you want to know anyway?' Silence again. 'You know, you really should let go of your hate.'

'Should I?'

'Yes, you should. It took me years to stop hating that part of me that transforms every month. Hating it for what it was, the dangers it brought, the way it affected my life. But there comes a point when you have to accept it as a part of yourself. How else can you move on?'

Snape turned a disparaging eye on him. 'Hardly the same thing.'

'No, it isn't. *You* don't lose self-control every month. That is,' Remus added, lowering his defences a little, 'I did until the Wolfsbane Potion.'

'Self-control? I dare say that isn't what *he* thinks.'

'Dumbledore?'

'Not about me.'

'I'm sure that isn't true. You know as well as I do Dumbledore believes it's our choices that make us who we are.'

'Whoever / am.'

They had returned to this difficult subject. What did Remus really expect, coming here? Did he think James would become clearer in time, that the more often he presented himself the more likely his old friend could be teased out, as though they were ten and he was calling at his house to ask if he could come out to play? But Snape was a determined keeper.

'I must attend to this potion. I haven't made it in a very long time.'

It was the usual curt dismissal. Remus had got used to it by now; he'd had to. 'Promise me you'll talk to Dumbledore if it's bothering you?' he said as he got up.

'Why should I be concerned with what he thinks?'

Remus sighed; it was pointless to force the issue. At the door, he remembered something he had been wondering about. He looked back into the shadows. 'Does Wormtail know?'

He thought he saw Snape grimace. 'Thankfully not. I dread to think what the rat would do if he did. Beg for forgiveness on bended knee or something equally nauseating. At least it would provide the opportunity to give the traitor what he deserves.'

Remus was glad Peter did not know. But he felt a certain sadness too. Peter had made his own choices and was paying the price for them.

But he knew Snape was making his own as well. He knew it, despite the wait for James's presence to wake from his passive state. It may be James's magic he was using, but it was clear Snape was wielding all the power. Where were a person's decisions made but in the past, on the lonely island of memories? The ocean from James's seemed too far to cross.

Remus wished he could reassure him the way Minerva or Dumbledore would surely do. It would not hurt them to find the truth that was beyond Remus's capability. He only hoped Snape would one day understand it for himself.

And perhaps make the choice to be open with Harry as well.

-x-

A small group of Ravenclaws had stopped in the corridor to watch the show. But their fun did not last long. Several Slytherins were shoving them aside, eager not to miss out.

'Potty, Potty, Crackpot Potty,' screeched Peeves as he whirled in front of Harry.

'Go pick on someone more transparent,' yelled Ron.

'Ooooh, who's more transparent than Potty Potter?' howled Peeves.

'What's that supposed to mean?' demanded Ron, giving him a hefty swot as he somersaulted over their heads.

Harry had had enough. He drew his wand. *Waddawasi!*

A piece of gum a third-year Slytherin had been happily chewing as he looked on flew out of his mouth and shot up Peeves' right nostril.

'Great shot!' cried Ron as Peeves yelped.

'Well, I was aiming for the other side, but never mind.'

Peeves shot away.

'Making a spectacle again, Potter?'

They turned around to see Snape's black figure sweeping toward them. Glancing back, Harry was disturbed to see a few of the younger Slytherins staying behind waiting to see if this turn in events would result in something more to their liking.

Ron noticed Harry's nervous look. 'We haven't done anything wrong,' he said to Snape, who had now caught up to them. 'It was just Peeves.'

'Was I speaking to you, Weasley?'

It was their first encounter since their last Potions class, since Harry's reckless outburst. Harry's stomach was churning itself to ribbons. He was at Snape's mercy. Harry hardly seemed to care about the half a dozen Slytherins watching expectantly. It was somehow worse that Ron was here, and that he would learn his true feelings when Snape chose to throw them back at him.

Snape's black eyes slid to Harry. 'My office, Potter.' And he marched through them, forcing the dawdling Slytherins to stand aside to let him past. Harry was as relieved as they were disappointed.

'I'll see you in the common room,' he said to Ron, who wore a worried frown. But Harry was glad the belittling would take place in the privacy of Snape's office. Or maybe this was about his father, he wondered as he followed Snape. Perhaps he had written to him after all? Or his stomach lurched again maybe something had happened to him?

The dungeons weren't far, and before he knew it Snape had closed the door after him with a click. He stood in Snape's office and waited for the bad news.

Or, he thought hopefully, Snape was just bored and wanted to rub his face in the fact his father had cut all ties with his past, and then try to make him stop 'overdoing' his Occlumency practice again.

And, of course, to ridicule him about how he would just love to get away from everyone, change his name, his identity to run away from his responsibilities of being the Boy Who Lived.

'Sadly,' said Snape, 'no cure has yet been discovered for arrogance.' He paused to enjoy the opening insult, and Harry got the feeling he had been practising, along with the sneer. Though it did not seem to last as long as usual. 'But since you plainly have no intention of heeding my warnings on excessive Occlumency practice, then you will take this.'

It was then Harry noticed he was holding a vial. He eyed the turquoise liquid that half-filled it. 'What is it?'

'It will relieve the pain.'

'You mean for the headaches? I managed to get some off Madam Pomfrey the other day.'

'Madam Pomfrey's are merely for general aches and pains. They will be next to useless in this case. Occlumency is a delicate art it involves subtleties that cannot be appreciated by those who do not practise it. And those who mispractise it.'

'It's a potion specially for Occlumency headaches?' said Harry immediately with scepticism. But what he felt was glad. It meant the headaches were not completely abnormal after all.

'Yes, Potter,' Snape curled a lip, 'it seems they can arise due to some weakness in the head.'

Harry took an odd sort of comfort from the smirk things were already back to normal after his outburst a few days ago. But what was exciting was what this potion seemed to mean. 'Really?' He gazed in awe at the liquid in Snape's hand. 'It'll really stop my headaches so I can carry on doing Occlumency practice?'

Snape's fingers closed around it jealously. 'It's temporary.'

'Until when?'

Snape thinned his mouth. 'It should last you several weeks.'

'Then what?'

Snape's jaw tightened. He said softly, 'Be grateful I'm giving you this, Potter.'

Harry stayed silent and stared instead at Snape's fist where the potion firmly remained.

'This does not come without a condition,' Snape said at last.

Harry looked up.

'I am not to hear from any professor that you've been practising in their class.'

Not even History of Magic? He had finally found some useful way of relieving the sheer boredom of Binns' class. 'All right.' Harry reached to take the potion. But Snape kept it back. His glare was infuriating. 'All right, fine. I won't practise Occlumency in anybody's class.' *Except maybe Binns*, he thought. If he didn't have a body, it didn't really count, did it? Besides, Binns wouldn't even know it if he woke up in a new one.

It was all Harry could do to stop himself grabbing the bottle Snape was now slowly arcing forward. The threat of swift removal was made real by the keenness of Snape's eye, as the bottle inched closer. He was giving Harry every chance to make a move. But he held out, and with great effort Harry simply unfurled his palm when it was too near for Snape to do anything but plant it there with a sour expression.

The instant Harry felt its solidness in his hand, he wanted to run with it to his trunk by his bed so it could not be taken back. The cool glass and the lightness of its weight were deceiving: This little bottle was a life-saver maybe literally. He would not have to worry about Occlumency again, or his dad.

'You are to take three drops two to three times a day with water no more,' intoned Snape. 'You will not let it into the hands of anyone else, because it is specific to your needs and may be dangerous for others. And you are to tell nobody of its existence. Are you listening to me, Potter?'

'Wha...?' He looked up on hearing his name barked. 'Yeah.'

Snape's eyes narrowed. 'How much should you take?'

'Three drops two or three times a day. And no more,' he added at Snape's glare.

'Tell no one. Understand?'

'Right. Because then they might figure out why I'm doing it and find out about my dad.'

Snape's look was withering, almost weary. 'That's right.'

'But there isn't much here,' Harry said, holding the bottle perfectly vertical and peering at the line of liquid that sat stolidly at his thumb. 'Should I come back to you when...'

'It is temporary only.'

'But...'

'You are not to be dependent on something such as this.'

'But I'm not going to stop. It's important.' Harry clutched the vial that guaranteed he would not slack off from making sure Voldemort could not get into his thoughts and discover he knew the truth about his dad.

'It's a temporary solution,' Snape repeated. But he seemed less certain. He turned on his heel and strode to the door. 'Who knows,' he said with more confidence, pulling the handle, 'something might even stick this time. I suppose stranger things have happened.'

Harry decided not to press the subject. There was always a point with Snape when it was best just to let it go. He sensed this was one of those points as he stepped into the corridor holding the bottle close to his chest. He felt Snape's eyes on him as he passed; the glass was now warm and moist in his hand. It was already his.

Maybe he was planning on coming up with a better potion? That must be it. It was the least Snape could do after putting his dad in danger by trying to make him reduce his Occlumency practice.

He didn't even care that Snape was obviously saving up what he had learned from what Harry had blurted out the other day for another, more public, occasion. It didn't bother him that Snape wanted to make him sweat some more on that. He felt like a burden had been lifted from him. His steps back up the stairs were as light as the bottle in his hand.

## Tactics

Chapter 9 of 11

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

A layer of dust gathered on Snape's fingertips as he ran them along the books' worn spines. He paused at a black cover with bold silver lettering and hastily removed his hand. That dark stain looked suspiciously like blood.

What on earth was he doing here, he wondered, letting his arm drop to his side. There had been a time when he had taken secret delight in sneaking in to pore over the treasure-trove of Dark magic in the school library. Even in broad daylight he had often succeeded in evading Madam Pince to step over the ropes marking out the Restricted Section and hunch undetected in a corner devouring such collections as *Secrets of Spell-Making Deciphered*. Volume three, *Constructing Cunning Curses*, had been among the most inspiring.

But he had no use for the past.

Today he had his own healthy collection at home. It was smaller and was duller for boasting none of the rarer older titles that as a schoolboy he had handled with precious care. But it often had its uses when any Death Eaters paid an unexpected call. And he enjoyed the image it presented. It was important, in this as well as other things, that from the outset no one was in any doubt as to what to expect from him. It saved a lot of bother later on. And further uninvited visits.

He belonged here among these archaic texts declaring their hidden strength to those blessed few who would understand them. But he was struck by the greater meaning now in that sense of belonging. He was here today only because of the Dark Lord's magic. The surrounding books took on a macabre feel; those on necromancy were lurking on a shelf just to the left. Perhaps one day someone would write one about him. The Dark Lord was writing Snape's story still it seemed. But it was the Dark Lord's mistake to believe the pages of his own were not numbered.

He moved on to the shelves above until his eye fell on one that appeared promising. Extracting the leather-bound volume, he held it at arm's length so as not to breathe in the cloud of dust it released. The contents did indeed warrant further study.

Two more potentially interesting books later, and he had enough material to make a start on his research.

He gave the shelves one final cursory look. At the end of the row thick-set lettering, green against red, caught his eye. An internal debate struck up in him again. He had been toying with it ever since Lucius had first planted the tempting idea in his head. He edged closer and frowned at the spine, garish and loud as though it were audibly arguing its case for inclusion in his studies.

Although not technically Dark magic, all books on Animagi were restricted by the Ministry, plainly wishing to avoid grisly mishaps by overzealous students. It was a regulation that had not quelled his own teenage interest, of course. He had made the first tentative attempts back then. But it had quickly become clear his time was better spent pursuing more useful subjects. From the little he knew on the topic, it took more than mere desire to successfully become an Animagus. It must be worked at and was most easily achieved before adolescence. At his age now, he had little chance, even if he dedicated the rest of his life to the goal.

But James Potter had already done much of the work for him. Perhaps, he reasoned, gazing at the gaudy spine of *Animagi: Discover the Animal Within*, he would transform into a creature useful to the role of spy. If small, like Pettigrew's rat, it would give him the ability to reach places others could not. The advantage that would present would be invaluable. It was an opportunity it would be foolish to dismiss.

And if the worst came to the worst and his initial attempts led to a lumbering stag, he at least would have a base to work from, to mould into a more useful form. No doubt Potter would not make it easy for him.

He weighed the risks against the potential benefits. He would have to take care practising. But he would get to that. For now, there would be no harm in reading the book. He was about to reach for it when he sensed movement in an aisle just beyond the boundary rope.

Few students were in the library so early on Saturdays. It was why he had come here now. He peered through a gap in the shelves, catching the shadow of an old thrill as he imagined the omnipresent Pince rounding the corner. Perhaps it was another teacher – although that would be little better, considering the material in his hands.

But any anxiety he might have felt was swept aside for annoyance as he saw the scrawny hair and owl-like glasses.

At least the Potter boy could not come nosing around his part of the library. But it was disconcerting to see him hovering close by. He was flipping through a thin wide book, like a picture-book or manual of some kind. Why did that infernal librarian put the Quidditch books at the back right next to the Restricted Section? It was simply inviting trouble. It was irritating to find he was trapped here, like a mischievous child. He kept watch and very still, calling easily on a skill he had first begun to refine in these very aisles.

The leisurely way Potter was leafing through the book suggested he would not be leaving anywhere near quickly enough.

It was some consolation the boy was no longer drawing attention to himself around the school – at least in terms of the side-effects of his excessive Occlumency practice. There would be no relinquishing of his celebrity status, of course.

But there was the boy's strange little outburst after class the other week.

It was unsettling to dwell on. It was as though it had not been Potter talking.

Stress – it had plainly been the stress of pushing the link he shared with the Dark Lord. But Snape had found nothing untoward inside the boy's head as he had prattled on – no suggestion the Dark Lord was manipulating him – nor any deceit on Potter's part.

In fact he had never seen a mind so open at that moment. It had seemed to rush to meet him, embrace him, so that he had pulled back as soon as he had seen enough.

It was difficult to consider just where they had come from, those words. They had not been Potter's. They could not have been further from Potter's. They belonged to neither Potter.

Indeed, the boy could not have been channelling his father – his father would not have recognised his words, would have scoffed at them. Such concepts as the son had uttered had been too subtle for the father.

Still, he reminded himself as he watched a page being turned, the potion the boy now had would prevent any more unnerving demonstrations.

It seemed it would remain a mystery.

'Hiding from me?' The young voice carried a malicious edge, and Draco came into view as Potter turned.

What was this, Snape wondered: had Quidditch finally managed to worm its way onto the school curriculum?

'Why the hell would I be hiding from you?' said Potter.

'Oh, I think you know.' Draco appeared extraordinarily sure of himself.

'Yeah? Why're you following me, Malfoy? And don't say you're not. Because how else would you know where the library is?'

Draco put up a decent fight to maintain the confidence in his smirk. When it was clear he was losing it, he made some movement Snape could not follow through the small space between shelves. '*Accio*.'

'Give it back, Malfoy.'

Draco's easy smirk returned as he examined the book he had summoned out of Potter's hand. 'You're gonna need all the help you can get this year,' he said, thumbing nonchalantly through what was plainly some tactic-laden Quidditch manual.

'That's what *you* think. Just grow up and give it back.'

'You know what? This looks like it might come in handy. Mind if I take it out first?' He shot a wide smile at an angry-looking Potter.

Snape did not need to be a seer to predict this squabble was about to devolve into a hexing match.

-X-

'I said give it back, Malfoy.' Harry reached beneath his robes.

'Potter!'

He turned with Malfoy to see Snape advancing on them, a pile of books in his arms. Malfoy looked delighted.

'What are you doing?' Snape stared at Harry.

Harry's fingers tightened around his wand. 'Trying to get my book back.'

'And as I've been explaining,' said Malfoy, 'I'll return it straight away. But it seems Potter's *sinsisting* he wants it first, sir.'

'Indeed? Be reasonable, Potter, and wait your turn like everyone else. Or is that beyond your amazing capabilities?'

Harry made an effort to rein in his now-doubled loathing.

'That's all right, sir.' Malfoy closed *Sweeping the Field: Best-Kept Quidditch Secrets* and held it out. 'We don't need any help anyway. Gryffindor needs it a lot more than us this year.'

'Well, take it, Potter. Very generous of you, Draco.'

Harry raged inside as he extended an arm.

'Ten points to Slytherin,' said Snape, infuriating Harry further. 'And twenty points from Gryffindor.'

Harry glared. 'What for?'

Snape returned the glare tenfold. 'For impertinence.'

Malfoy's greedy smile as Snape swept away with his books looked to be threatening to engulf his face. 'Well, I can't hang around here all day watching you grasp at straws.' He grinned and glanced at the Quidditch manual Harry was squeezing. 'Try to remember what the big field is for – we don't want you forgetting – thrashing

Gryffindor is nowhere *near* as much fun without you.'

He strode away, and Harry turned to see Snape two aisles down. He wasn't going to let this pass. 'That was unfair,' he said as he caught up to him.

A sneer was curling Snape's lips. 'I beg your pardon?'

'It was obvious Malfoy had taken the book off me, not the other way round.'

'Is that so?' said Snape coldly.

'So why take points off Gryffindor?'

'I recall,' said Snape with annoying calmness, apparently enjoying Harry's anger, 'you referring to them as – I quote – "stupid bloody points".'

Harry stared, his reply smouldering his throat. But it was just like Snape to throw something like that back in his face. He wasn't going to lose it like he had at the end of class when they had argued over Occlumency. He had been worried about his dad then, but now all he saw was Snape's smirk of amusement.

Snape was watching him seethe. He had thinned his mouth, but Harry kept his shut.

'I suppose it does require a modicum of intelligence.' Snape's expression had turned sullen. 'Tell me, were you expecting me to deduct points?'

Would Malfoy grow up to be a world-class moron? Already this year Snape must have taken hundreds of points off Gryffindor. 'Yeah.' Harry concentrated his rage in the small hard word.

'Sir,' said Snape, finally conceding some reproof. His eyes narrowed. 'Was Mr Malfoy expecting the same?'

He ought to go now – just walk out and leave Snape to his patronising questions. But he felt trapped by them: they both incensed and entranced him. 'Yes,' he said *slr*.

But Snape said nothing. Harry waited for the nasty punchline.

'Surely even someone as dim as you cannot fail to see a Malfoy always gets what he expects?'

His gaze was withering. But it shifted as Harry felt his own glare wane. Harry looked beyond the insult about himself to the one about the Malfoys – and Snape saw it. He set his thin mouth and held his books closer. His nostrils flared, but he was silent and calculating. Snape had told him more than he had wanted to. And he would make Harry pay for learning something about his relationship with the Malfoys.

He tried to think of an excuse to get away. Black eyes were sliding over his face. They crept across his scar. It tingled under the cold scrutiny, as though it were remembering the first day they had set eyes on each other, when Snape had been talking with Voldemort-possessed Quirrell.

'Wait here.' Snape marched away, leaving Harry in the aisle with his Quidditch book, thinking over what had just happened. He recalled Snape's reaction in the school infirmary last summer when he had mentioned seeing Lucius Malfoy in the graveyard with the newly returned Voldemort. Snape had turned away, not wanted him to see what he thought.

He must have misunderstood Snape's remark just now. He had never heard him say anything against Lucius Malfoy or Draco. And he hadn't now, had he? Harry had misread what he had said. He was thinking too much about his dad in relation to Snape – his dad had to trick and fool the Death Eaters to spy on them, but Snape would always think highly of the Malfoys. A Malfoy always got what he expected simply because he always did. He was a Malfoy. There was no trickery there.

'Page one hundred and thirty-seven.' Snape was holding out a thin book bound in black. Its dark cover was blank, as was its spine. 'Well, find the page,' said Snape as Harry turned it in his hand.

Harry wedged the Quidditch manual under his arm. He opened Snape's book.

'Now you will understand the real risks of excessively Occluding a growing mind – and this does not even take into consideration your link with the Dark Lord – which increases the dangers immeasurably.'

Was the book about Occlumency? How could he tell? It was so full of jargon it might as well have been in a foreign language.

He didn't know what Snape's problem was. He was taking the potion he had given him, and it seemed to be working. He could stay alert in classes again, and he was sleeping better than ever before. Even Snape must understand some risks were worth taking to ensure the safety of others?

He gave up after a few lines and simply pretended to read, hoping Snape would leave. He wondered if his dad did Occlumency – he supposed he must, as he and Snape did more or less the same job. They worked together. It was hard to imagine. Lupin had called it 'an awkward union'. Harry thought that must be something of an understatement considering what he had seen of how his dad had treated Snape when they had been kids. And everything Sirius said suggested Snape always gave as good as he got. 'Professor?' He blinked away the tangle of words imprinted on his retina. 'Is my dad an Occlumens?'

Snape was still frowning. 'Well, what do you think?'

'Did you teach him?'

An odd expression fell across Snape's face. His jaw twitched. 'Such discussions are not for public places.'

Harry glanced about. The aisles were empty and silent. Hardly anyone came in here on a sunny Saturday morning.

But then he heard the rustling of robes. He slammed shut the Occlumency book and slid it beneath the Quidditch manual.

'That's a restricted book.' Madam Pince was already pointing an accusing finger when she appeared. Harry stared down in bemusement, wondering how she could possibly know, since the only portion of the book visible was its dark blank spine.

'I gave it to him,' said Snape.

'You need a note from a teacher to take out restricted books, boy,' she pursued, ignoring Snape, who, Harry noticed, was scowling at her remarkably like Ron had done the other day at an ink stain that refused to shift from his Potions essay.

'He has permission from me.'

She eyed Snape with apparent suspicion. 'I must have a note. For my records.'

Harry shifted. Part of him wanted to tell Snape the book was obviously too advanced to be of any use to him anyway. But the look on his face as he glared at the librarian was so intense, Harry decided it might be best to wait this one out.

Snape was digging his fingers into his own pile of books; his knuckles stood out stark white against the rest of his sallow skin. 'I need a quill and parchment,' he muttered.

To Harry's astonishment, she whisked out from somewhere about her person a clipboard with a quill attached. Probably, he thought, used to write critical notes about students as she prowled the library, like Filch did around the rest of the Castle. But it seemed he wasn't the only one who hadn't been expecting this. An infuriated Snape thrust his books into Harry's arms. Madam Pince, oblivious to Harry's struggles under the weight of the additional books, peered at Snape as he scrawled his authorisation.

Harry wished he had stayed in bed a few hours longer after all.

He glanced down at Snape's books, unsurprised to find the topmost title in an unfamiliar language. Curiosity gnawed as he listened to the slow scrape of quill on rough parchment. He twisted the pile so he could glance at the spines. The second had fancy lettering too – but the last one looked interesting. Snape was still engrossed in his tight script as Harry slipped the book out to the top. He opened the cover to the blurb inside.

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'I trust that is satisfactory.' Snape was glaring as he handed the note to Madam Pince.

She took her time scrutinising it, as though it might be carrying some hidden message, then uttered a terse, 'It will do.' She shot Harry one last accusatory stare before leaving to stalk the other aisles.

After a lingering, withering look at the retreating librarian, Snape turned back to Harry. 'If anyone asks, you stole it,' he said, indicating the Occlumency book. 'No one would believe you incapable of illicit trips to the Restricted Section.'

Frowning at the guilty look Harry was trying to conceal at this reminder of his sole 'illicit trip' right under Snape's nose in first year, Snape's gaze lowered to the opened book in Harry's arms.

To Harry's amazement, Snape blanched and snatched the entire pile, slamming shut the top book before Harry had the chance to see what had made him react.

'Well?' said Snape, acting as though nothing odd had just occurred, his customary glare fixed to his features.

'Er, yeah.' Harry gazed at the Occlumency book – and the Quidditch manual – Snape was now clutching with the others as though his life depended upon it. 'Er ... my, er, books?' he said, hoping Snape would notice he was empty-handed. He wasn't bothered about the Occlumency book. Although if Snape insisted he have it, he could stow it at the bottom of his trunk and pray Snape didn't test him on its contents. But he at least wanted the Quidditch manual back.

Snape finally deciphered his gaze and looked down. With a glower, he pulled out the bottom two and handed them over. His robes billowed as he strode toward the Potions section.

Harry clasped the Quidditch book. Malfoy wouldn't know what hit him come the next game. He made his way to the check-out table. He couldn't wait for the afternoon's practice to try the new manoeuvre he had spotted. It would knock them dead.

# **He was the reason**

## *Chapter 10 of 11*

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternative Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in 5th year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

Moody's bright blue magical eye rolled around in its socket before coming to rest on Snape again.

Snape was not fooled. He met its gaze. *If only you could see right into people as the rumours would have us believe.*

It was no secret Mad-Eye Moody distrusted him more than any other member of the Order including Black but Snape could not resist a wry inward smirk at the thought of concealing from the Auror a secret no amount of room-ransacking could have uncovered. Oh, he knew it had really been a Polyjuice-intoxicated Crouch who had turned over his office last year. But that did nothing to lessen Snape's loathing for the man now sitting opposite. Either it was merely his own paranoia or Moody's detection of it that the demonic eye was pointing in his direction more often lately. Constant vigilance indeed.

'Thank you,' said Dumbledore as Arthur's report came to an end. Glancing around the kitchen table over his spectacles, his gaze came to rest on Snape.

Anyone else, Snape considered, might have gone insane long ago reporting regularly for both sides. Double that of everyone else, exponentially more so this past year since the Dark Lord's return. And teaching on top of that, which was arguably no less stressful. Not to mention keeping an eye on the boy. But there was something satisfying about having his mind so occupied. Indeed, in all likelihood, there was no better guarantee of sanity.

'Severus?' said Dumbledore.

Snape felt all eyes move towards him expectantly as their link to the heart of the Dark Lord's plans. All expectant, that is, except for Moody's magical one and, to its right, Black's suspicious two. 'It seems,' he began, relishing the attention his duties attracted, even if it was from this ragtag assembly, 'we were correct in our suspicions. The possibility of a planned attack is becoming more and more apparent.'

'Possibility?' said Black. 'Don't you *know*?'

It was odd, Snape reflected, how Black habitually questioned his loyalties and yet remained eager for definite news from him. 'It appears the plans, as always, are not well thought-out,' he told Dumbledore, avoiding Black's stare. 'Their talk is mostly in the form of bragging about the destruction they will cause. Nevertheless, I believe it is almost certain the target is Hogsmeade.'

There was a thick silence as the group took this information in. Dumbledore broke their uneasy thoughts. 'And are you any nearer to ascertaining a specific date?'

'No. But I have a hunch it may fall on one of the school-outing days.'

'Indeed?' said Dumbledore. 'That would be most serious. What makes you believe this?'

'Because I've noticed a certain pattern of questioning by some about the school routine. The trips to Hogsmeade in particular. Their dates, who normally goes on them. Of course their own children attend Hogwarts, but it isn't normally the topic of choice among the Death Eaters.'

'So the scum are after innocent children, eh?' said Moody gruffly. Molly made a light noise, and Arthur covered her hand.

'What if they're planning on a particular student being there?' said Nymphadora to Lupin's left.

Snape inwardly groaned. It was only a matter of time until a reference was made during an Order meeting to the pint-sized celebrity.

'Well,' said Dumbledore, 'it certainly does seem odd to plan for a day when most of Hogwarts will be there. As you say, many themselves have children attending. And with the teachers there too.' He surveyed Snape. 'Are you sure? It would be rather strange if they expected you to be there supervising the students.'

'Of course I cannot be certain. All I can say is there has been recent interest in the school routine, and the planned raid appears to be on Hogsmeade. Whether the two are linked...'

'Unless,' said Dumbledore slowly, 'they *are* planning on your attendance.'

'Maybe you've been rumbled, Snape,' exclaimed Moody, his magical eye staring across the table. Snape could have sworn Black had sniggered.

'We have to consider the possibility they expect you to be there, if indeed this plan is set for a Hogsmeade trip.' Dumbledore looked gravely at Snape. 'You must attend them as usual. And remain neutral if anything does transpire. By not taking part, there will be less chance of you being suspected.'

Black muttered something that sounded like 'useless'.

'Perhaps you would like to be kept informed, Black, so you could help out when a raid occurs?' said Snape. 'Ah, no I forgot you must remain here to brew the tea for when we return with our reports.'

Black's eyes glistened with fury.

'Do you think that's wise?' said Minerva, deftly glossing over the tiff and curtailing Snape's pleasure. 'Wouldn't it seem stranger if Severus *did* attend, with his knowledge of the attack?'

'But Severus does not know of the attack,' said Dumbledore. 'Merely assumptions of where and when it will take place. If we knew specifics, perhaps I would agree with you, but as it is ... I think it's best if we follow that plan until we do know more. Agreed?'

Snape nodded his assent under the watchful gaze of Moody's blue orb. Dumbledore was right, of course. He could not be seen fighting alongside the Order. And it would be risky even to pretend to fight against the Order merely to keep his cover. He could later cite his continued worth as spy on Dumbledore for his lack of participation, and his aversion to aiding the Order as the reason for remaining neutral.

The meeting came to an end, and with a clatter of plates over the hum of the room, Molly cleared away the remains of cakes and biscuits and half-drunk tea.

'Severus, I have this report I would like you to go over.' Dumbledore handed him a parchment. 'It provides further details of January's breakout at Azkaban. Alastor, Kingsley, could I have a word?' He turned back to Snape. 'I shall return shortly,' he said and retreated in the direction of the drawing room followed by Moody and Shacklebolt.

As the remaining Order members left, some by the front door, some using Floo powder, Snape retook his seat at the kitchen table and studied the untidy, almost illegible, writing of a Ministry quill-pusher.

From what he could gather, it appeared rumours the Ministry was losing control of the Dementors were true; they were hardly contributing to the search for the escapees. It would not be long, Snape speculated, before the Dark Lord claimed the Dementors as among his followers.

His face scrunched in concentration. Squinting at the scribbled words under the poor lighting, he caught a glimpse of familiar shabby robes. 'Lupin, spell the lights up. I can barely read this appalling scrawl.'

Through the silence that followed, Snape continued attempting to interpret the lazy writing until the unmistakable voice of Black growled, 'Why don't you do it yourself, Snape?'

'That's all right, Sirius, I've got it,' said Lupin as Snape raised his head to see Black, arms folded, staring at him from across the room.

'Something wrong with your magic, Snape?' spat Black while Lupin spelled the lights brighter.

Snape was sorely tempted to tell Black exactly what was wrong with his magic.

Clearly misinterpreting the pause as confirmation, Black taunted, 'So, you really *are* useless?' and raised his eyebrows.

Snape felt unnervingly as he had done at Hogwarts years ago when Black and Potter used to corner him while Lupin watched from the sidelines. In fact, he thought ruefully, only the rat's presence was needed to complete the picture.

'Very convenient,' said Black, 'wangling your way out of helping the Order in any attack.'

'And you're the expert on that, aren't you, Black?' sneered Snape softly.

He ignored the jibe. 'I suppose you're going to use your inadequacies in the magic department as an excuse, too?'

'Inadequacies? If I have any inadequacies, I wonder just whose fault they are?'

'Well, they're certainly not Remus's so stop using him to make up for them.'

'He's not using me, Sirius.' But Black was keeping his gaze fixed on Snape, who could almost hear the horribly bright smile as Lupin tried another tack. 'Anyone fancy some tea?'

'Perhaps Potter's, then?' Snape whispered.

'What! Trying to pin something else on Harry ...*Snivellus*?'

'Not *that* Potter.'

As soon as Black pulled out his wand, Snape shot from his chair and did the same. He flicked his eyes between Black's wand and his reddening face.

'How dare you speak ill of the dead!' Black circled the table. 'You make me sick, Snivellus!'

Snape fixed a malicious sneer to his lips. 'Dead?'

'Both of you, *stop!*'

Snape took his eyes off Black for a second to jeer back at Lupin, 'I thought you wanted me to tell him?'

Lupin turned his weak resolve to their outstretched wands. 'Not like this.'

'Tell me what?' He threw a questioning glance towards Lupin, who avoided his gaze. Black stared back at Snape and raised his voice further. 'I don't want to hear any more high-blown tales about how you supposedly risk your neck for the Order, Snivellus. I couldn't give two Snitches!'

'Now, now,' bellowed Moody from just outside in the hall, and when Black had reverted to a simple threatening stare, *aclump, clump* could be heard as the veteran Auror entered the room. 'We're all on the same side.' He turned his magical eye on Snape. 'Aren't we?'

Snape gritted his teeth and replaced his wand. Grabbing the Ministry report from the table, he strode into the hallway, where Nymphadora and Molly were chatting in a corner in hushed tones.

Why should he fill Black in on the facts and give him the satisfaction of knowing his old friend Potter had succeeded where he had failed in his attempt to kill the object of their ridicule?

'Ah, could I have a brief word, Severus?' said Dumbledore from the drawing room doorway.

He moved past him into the room and heard a click as Dumbledore closed the door.

Curious as to why he needed such privacy to discuss the Ministry's report, Snape turned to see him remove from his robes a small bottle.

'What is it?' said Snape. Its silvery contents swirled within its glass confines, and he recognised it at once. He took the proffered vial, wondering why the man was handing him his memories.

'While at Azkaban recently,' said Dumbledore, 'I took the opportunity to visit Flintoff. I persuaded him to relinquish it.'

Snape frowned at the swirling memory. 'What is it of?' But he knew as soon as he had asked for what other memory belonging to that Death Eater meant anything to him? and answering his own question, the shards dislodged from his throat. 'Godric's Hollow.'

At Dumbledore's silent confirmation, he exclaimed, 'And why do you think I would wish to see this?'

'You do not have your own memory of the events. You were incapacitated...'

'I rather think the word you mean is "deceased".'

'Severus, I think it would help you to see things objectively. Sometimes, I find the use of a Pensieve aids me a great deal. But it is your choice. You may dispose of it as you wish.'

Dumbledore's reference to choices crystallised his jumbled thoughts toward Lupin's earlier comments on the Headmaster's opinion. Now would be as good a time as any to bring the subject up. At the worst, he could only confirm what Snape believed the old man thought anyway. He drew a few determined breaths then said, 'Why do you trust me?'

Those infuriating clear blue eyes, as unfathomable as the deepest ocean, looked startled for a moment, then quickly focused on him appraisingly. 'You know why.'

Snape felt a lip quirk. 'No, Dumbledore. That was not trust. You spotted an opportunity, and you took it. Fourteen years have passed since then.' He resisted the urge to shake the vial in the man's face. 'And the Dark Lord has returned. So I ask again: why do you trust me?'

Dumbledore studied him. He knew he had never asked this before, not in all these years. But everything was different now.

'Whenever have you given me reason not to?' said Dumbledore at last. His dismissive reply maddened Snape; he made it sound as though it were obvious.

'Answer my question.'

'But I can give no other answer.'

'Perhaps it is this ' and now Snape did wave the memory in the air, so that wisps of it eddied inside the glass ' this that proves my loyalty.'

Dumbledore frowned. 'I do not see how that can be...'

'No? But you must see how things have been. I have not had the tarnished soul of a Death Eater all these years. It is him. It is him you trust.' He felt like shoving the vial down the man's throat. But instead he squeezed it in his fist as he watched Dumbledore watching him, and hoped it would crack.

'Do you really believe James's soul to be flawless?'

Snape felt a heat spring to life low in his belly. 'Don't you see it? Him! He was the reason ... Him, not...' The fire was rising now, snatching his breath.

Dumbledore seemed finally to understand something, at least. 'Choices,' he said. 'It is our choices that define us. You of all people know that.'

'But...'

'No.' He held up a hand. 'You know your own reasoning over the years. Only you know why you made the choices you did. Were they are they James's memories you call upon? Those memories most precious to you you have more of them than even he had.'

Snape stayed silent. The old goat knew exactly how to pull his emotional strings. It was he who had handed that power to him, after all.

Dumbledore provided his own nod of confirmation. 'I think, then, the reasons were yours.'

Snape scowled. He would not be manipulated so easily.

'I think you would benefit from an objective viewpoint.' Dumbledore gestured to the vial. 'Which is partly why I procured this for you.'

Snape glared. 'So... The werewolf has been talking?'

'Remus did express some concern. But not on the issue of trust. You must learn to put more faith in people's sincerity.' Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. 'Including your own.'

Snape scrutinised the vial without seeing it. No, he would not be manipulated so easily. Not by Dumbledore, not by anyone. Least of all that big-headed idiot James Potter.

In fact, if anything, it was him controlling Potter, not the other way around.

He smirked to himself. Perhaps Lucius had been right after all. It was indeed poetic justice for the man who had pervaded his life when alive. In death, Potter was simply making up for injuries.

No, it was plain that nothing of any of this was Potter's doing. Because Potter's biggest concern had always been Potter. He'd had no sense of practicalities.

Practicalities. Perhaps he would take a look at that Animagi book after all. It was about time James Potter showed himself useful for something.

'It may be best,' said Dumbledore, bringing Snape out of these promising thoughts, 'if we told Sirius the truth it could help to prevent difficult moods developing during meetings.'

'What? Black would only hate *me more*. And if he didn't...' He could hardly bear thinking of that possibility. 'It's bad enough with Lupin but *Black* began to treat me like an old friend as well, like I was one of their gang, the mindless Marauders... I shan't be held responsible for my actions.'

And he wouldn't be. He'd blame it on Black's old friend, and Black could go hang.

Dumbledore sighed. 'Well, perhaps you will change your mind if you decide to take a look at this,' he said, indicating the memory. 'And if you obtain further information on this potential raid, please inform me straight away.'

When he had gone, Snape took a moment to fold the Ministry report and tuck it with the memory into a pocket of his robes. He swept out into the hallway.

'Everything all right?' asked Lupin as Snape removed his travelling cloak from the stand.

'Utterly wonderful,' he drawled. He noticed Nymphadora disappearing through the front doorway as he fastened his cloak, her hair a drab brown. 'Babysitting Black again?'

Lupin stole a glance at her retreating back. 'He's lonely cooped up in this big house.'

'And the Dementors were perfect company for him in Azkaban, I suppose?'

Lupin frowned.

'You're a fool to fritter your life away minding Black.'

'He's a friend. Why shouldn't I be worried about him?'

'How touching. But if the Dementors couldn't contain him, then I doubt you stand a better chance, not if he truly wants to leave the house and endanger the Order.'

'I have to try. He keeps threatening to leave and you're not helping.'

Snape snorted. If Black wanted to risk being caught or killed now his Animagus form was widely known, that was his call. He was an idiot to have allowed himself to be seen in plain view on the station platform at the start of school, since he was still a wanted murderer and he would die an idiot's death, Snape was certain of that.

'Well good luck.' Snape strode out into the cool night air.

As soon as he had stepped beyond the harsh orange beam of a street lamp, he Disapparated to the gates of Hogwarts.

A brisk walk across the school grounds later, he reached the privacy of his dungeons office. Setting his cloak down on a chair, he pulled from his pocket the Ministry report, dragging with it the bottled memory it had become partially wrapped around.

He still had the Pensieve for Potter's Occlumency lessons. He could use it tomorrow.

He gazed at the vial, transfixed by the feathery mass bathed in candlelight. It appeared insubstantial, floating inside its glass cage. But it was weighted with meaning.

He peeled his eyes away.

He had already made his decision. He would no longer be dictated to by James Potter. No Dumbledore had made it clear tonight it had never been the case. That last shred of doubt lifted from him like the retreat of a Dementor. And he felt the last vestige of control James Potter had over him evaporate with it.

He looked back at the bottle. There would be no point indulging in sick fantasies of watching Potter being forced into resurrecting his favourite school prey.

But it would not do to dispose of the memory just yet. The Ministry may find some heinous crime Flintoff had been responsible for. The incarcerated Death Eater could be condemned to the Dementor's Kiss at any time, closing his memories off from the outside world forever. Watching Dumbledore's ghoulish gift rise and fall against the glass, he decided upon the perfect place to store it securely.

In the small square cabinet fixed to the wall, he set down the silver memory next to the vial the Dark Lord had given him the previous evening.

He gazed at the two bottles on the top shelf. A contrasting pair, he thought dryly as he observed their contents one light and silver, one a dense black liquid. The Dark Lord had charged him with keeping the latter safe and close at hand until he required it. Snape had carefully checked the contents, which were harmless enough, but extremely difficult to brew, and probably why he had requested its close protection. He had learned long ago not to question the Dark Lord's logic nor Dumbledore's, for that matter. Both bordered on insanity at times.

*It was certainly lunacy to resurrect me, wasn't it, my Lord?*

He locked the cabinet carefully, closing the door on one assignment from the Dark master, one from the other. Neither of which would he touch.

## If You Go Down to the Woods Tonight

What's worse than discovering you've someone else's soul instead of your own? What if it's that of your childhood enemy, James Potter? Harry and Snape each try to find out what's going on. Can they find a meeting point? Alternate Universe of Godric's Hollow. Set in fifth year (OotP). General (i.e. non-slash/romance).

**Author's note:** Thanks for reading this far! If you fancy leaving me a review/comment, no matter how brief, please don't feel shy. It's always uplifting to read others' thoughts. (And constructive criticism is *always* valued too.)

Harry shut the Herbology book and sat back in his chair. Most of the other fifth-years around the classroom, assigned as a study room for the evening, appeared to be having the same idea. Even Hermione was chatting with Lavender. After all the OWLs work over the Easter holidays most of which had been helpfully scheduled for him by Hermione Harry found himself looking forward to the new term and the prospect of something *anything* to break up the endless studying monotony.

He put away his books and strolled across to Ron. He was frowning at his study timetable. 'Look at this,' he said as Harry approached. 'It's just physically impossible. D'you think McGonagall'd let me have a Time-Turner like she did Hermione the other year? I mean, *how* can it be fair *she's* allowed one when she knows everything anyway?'

'Yeah, but I get the feeling McGonagall might see exams a bit different. Could be seen as cheating, you know?'

'What was that?' asked Hermione, clearly having heard a study keyword. 'If you stick to that until exams,' she said, pointing to Ron's schedule, 'you won't need to think about cheating.'

Ron did not take the bait. He folded the timetable and stuffed it in his bag while he fixed her with a sullen stare.

'No, no,' Luna was saying by the open window. 'Over there. Daddy says there must be some in the Forest. Look *irthat* direction.'

'I *know* where to look,' said Neville, whom she seemed to be instructing, 'but I'm telling you, there's nothing out there.'

'Well, you're not looking in the right place, then.'

'Are those Omniculars?' Harry asked.

Neville took the device from his eyes. 'Yeah,' he said, twiddling one of its many knobs. 'They're Luna's.'

'They're my dad's,' she corrected. 'You see, he uses them on his hunting trips, and he lent them to me so I could report back on the sightings of Karpola Borogoves in this area. There's quite a buzz about it all, you know. They only come out at night, so we're using the nocturnal setting to see them.'

Harry and Ron gave each other sideways looks. 'So, er, seen any, Neville?' asked Ron.

'Nah,' put in Seamus, who had overheard this last part as he was passing. 'He's only seen the Lesser-Spotted Snape. Or should that be Greater-Spotted, with all that grease? Anyway, Neville's probably given himself enough nightmares to last till exams.'

Neville frowned at Seamus's back disappearing through the doorway.

'Bad luck, Neville,' consoled Ron in a tight voice that suggested some effort to restrain amusement.

'I wonder what Professor Snape's doing out there at this time?' said Hermione.

'Perhaps he's heard of the sightings, too,' said Luna as she gazed out at the pitch-black Castle grounds.

'He's been going to the Forest nearly every night for at least the past week now,' explained Neville. 'Luna thinks he's on to something.'

Ron gave Harry another look and bent his head in a last-ditch attempt to hold in the mirth.

'That's strange,' said Hermione, doing her best to ignore the peculiar noises coming from Ron's nose.

'It's a full moon soon,' said Luna. 'They're very difficult to find then because they don't come out during a full moon,' she said, as though it was obvious this was the reason behind Snape's night-time excursions. 'If you look over there ...' she began, pointing out the Forest again to Neville.

But he promptly moved from the window and handed her the Omniculars. 'Maybe you'll have better luck than me,' he said, frowning at Ron still trying to contain himself. 'I'm gonna check on Trevor.'

Luna sighed as he collected his things and left. She appeared disappointed. Then, in an almost melodic way, she said, 'Good things only come to those who wait.'

'Well, Snape isn't worth waiting for,' pointed out Ron.

Luna gave him a disparaging glance and flounced out of the classroom. It was emptying rapidly now; with exams coming up in a few weeks, many of the older students were retiring to their dormitories earlier so, in theory, they could cram in as much studying as possible during the day.

Closing the window, Hermione asked Ron and Harry, 'But what's Snape doing in the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night?'

'Wonder if Hagrid knows anything?'

'Yeah, maybe some of his pets have *mysteriously* been going missing over the past week,' suggested Ron.

'Perhaps he's meeting someone in secret,' offered Hermione.

'Whoa!' said Ron, raising his hands. 'I don't want nightmares like Neville, thanks very much.'

Hermione looked blankly at him for a second before turning pink. 'Ron, I didn't mean that kind of ... Is that all boys can think of? I mean *spy* stuff. You know, something for the *Order*.'

'I guess it must be something important to risk the Forbidden Forest,' pondered Harry, 'especially at night.'

'Well he sure isn't out looking for those Crapola thingies. I bet he's up to something and Dumbledore doesn't know. He's already been softening you up for You-Know-Who with all those Occlumency lessons.'

'What?' Harry frowned.

'You always say you feel terrible when you practise.'

'Well, I've been feeling a lot better recently. And anyway, Snape wouldn't try something like that when he's helping my dad. It just wouldn't make any sense.'

'Oh, right,' nodded Ron, reeking of scepticism, 'so you really think he's on our side, now?'

'Yeah, well, maybe I do.' Snape still had not said a single word about his admission to hating being the Boy Who Lived and Snape had had countless opportunities since then to use it to mock him, both in public and in private. It was too much to hope he had simply forgotten all about it. Then there was that odd thing Snape had said in the library about the Malfoys. He was still trying to work out exactly what it meant, but even if Snape was not on the side of the Order, it appeared he did not like the Malfoys as much as everyone, including Draco, thought he did. It was scant evidence, he knew.

But most importantly, Snape had not given James away to Voldemort in all these years, despite the two men having been sworn enemies at school. If his dad trusted Snape now, then why, Harry thought, shouldn't he too? 'He even made...' He stopped. Snape had told him not to tell anyone about the potion he had given him. But what harm would it really do telling his friends?

'What?' prodded Ron.

'He gave me something just to stop the side effects of all the Occlumency practice I'm doing.'

'What like a potion? And you took it?'

'Yeah, why not? It helped.'

'Right just Snape helping out his *favourite* student. It's probably poison! Are you nuts?'

'Really, Ron,' chastised Hermione. 'Who's going to know what potions to best help Harry than a Potions master who's also an Occlumens?'

'It's not *poison*, Ron.' Maybe he should have been more wary, but it had been obvious at the time it was not poisonous by the reluctant way Snape had handed it over. 'I've never felt better and I've been taking it for ages now.'

'Well, it's probably a slow-acting one.'

'It'd have to be a *really* slow one, then, because I've nearly used it all.' In fact, Harry reminded himself, he would have to see Snape about some more soon.

'You're crazy,' said Ron. 'I bet he's out there right now meeting up with Death Eaters. Planning an attack on Hogwarts...'

Something clicked in Harry's head. 'You're right,' he cut in.

'What?' Ron blinked. 'You think he's planning to attack Hogwarts? Y'know, I was only joking ...'

'Hmm?' Harry was thinking furiously. 'No, I mean about him meeting Death Eaters.' He turned to Hermione. 'Maybe you're *both* right.'

She and Ron gave each other puzzled looks.

'He's meeting another *Death Eater spy*.' But they did not seem to get it. 'Who's the only other Death Eater spy we know of and who gets his information to the Order through Snape?'

They exchanged another look, but it wasn't one of bemusement this time, rather the opposite. Both diverted their gazes to the floor.

'What?' asked Harry, whose turn it was to be confused while he tried to interpret the sudden change in their body language.

'Well,' she began, 'about that. We ...' She glanced at Ron. 'We've been meaning to say something to you.'

'*What?*' demanded Harry, turning from Ron's downcast gaze to Hermione's troubled expression.

'Well, it just seems odd, that's all.' She bit her lower lip. 'You know, that he hasn't tried to contact you himself.'

Harry's heart sank. He did not want them to know the truth about Voldemort taking his dad's memories. 'Well, he's alive,' he said angrily, 'Lupin wouldn't lie to me about something like that.'

'Yeah, but,' said Ron, 'it's like you said when you looked in Snape's Pensieve. And maybe ... well ...' He looked to Hermione.

'Just say whatever it is you're trying to say.' Harry felt his anger increasing.

'How did he become a Death Eater?' Ron raised his shoulders. 'After what You-Know-Who did to him and his family and...'

'He's *pretending*, Ron. D'you think he *wanted* to be a Death Eater? Voldemort made him do it, and now he's *spretending*.' Harry turned to Hermione in exasperation. 'Do *you* think my dad's a genuine Death Eater, too?'

'We just thought it was strange, that's all. I mean, he's your dad and...'

'Exactly,' interrupted Harry. 'He's my *dad*, and he'd never do anything like that in a million years.'

'So why haven't you heard anything from him?' Ron persisted. 'Even now now you know he's alive? He wouldn't let a little thing like Snape stop him from seeing you. And why would You-Know-Who trust *your dad* of all people?'

Harry stared at his friends' guilty faces, debating whether or not to tell them the truth. But he could not let them carry on accusing his dad of being no better than the likes of Lucius Malfoy. 'If Voldemort had done that to *your* family, d'you think *you'd* want to face up to it all?'

'What d'you mean?'

Harry drew a deep breath. 'Voldemort used a spell on him, something to make him work for him, something that made him ... forget who he was, and ...' He lowered his gaze. 'And now he doesn't want to remember.' He looked back up at Hermione. 'And if he acknowledged me, then he'd have to deal with all that history, and obviously he doesn't want to. I mean, who would?'

She took this in. 'Don't you think that would be a little drastic,' she asked quietly, 'to cut himself off from his past?'

'As long as he's happy, that's what's important. And anyway, he can't really relate himself to what happened, can he? So it doesn't mean much to him. But it's not his fault,' he added. 'He can't remember any of it because of Voldemort.'

She glanced at Ron then looked back at Harry, who was relieved to see her and Ron's previous scepticism giving way to understanding. 'Harry, why didn't you tell us this before?' she asked.

'I ... I didn't want you worrying about me.'

'Don't be silly. That's what friends are for.'

'Because I'm all right with it, really,' rushed Harry. 'It's my dad's choice, isn't it? I mean, I'm not gonna force him to ...' He looked away. 'Really, I'm fine,' he said as she touched his shoulder lightly. He forced his gaze to meet hers and brought with it a smile. 'I've got Sirius.'

She smiled sympathetically.

But for the rest of the evening, Harry could not stop thinking about his father having been on the school grounds nearly every night over the past week, perhaps for the whole of the Easter holidays, without his knowledge. And he could even be there right now.

He went to the dormitory that night with his mind whirring. He had finally told his friends the truth, and it was an enormous release. He should have said something earlier. But he hated being pitied for being an orphan—he had never blamed his parents for that—but when your father did not *want* to know you ... He was just glad his friends understood he did not need them feeling sorry for him.

The last thing he wanted was for his dad to feel forced into doing something he did not wish to. It might even push him away further, hurt him. His father had been through enough, and even now, for the past fifteen years, he had been risking his life for the Order. Harry was proud of him for that alone. And he wanted to tell him so to his face.

It was with that last thought he checked no one was looking—most were still in the bathroom—and slipped into bed without changing into his pyjamas. He drew the bed curtains closed. As he listened to the room settle down for the night, he thought about Snape's potion.

It really was working; it was working so well he hadn't even realised he had stopped having those crazy dreams of men in a creaky house talking about some kind of what was it again? some antidote or other. He was glad of its absence—he had been getting fed up of its endless replays in his head. He wondered whether Snape's potion had some Dreamless Sleep Potion in it, too. And he could now carry on practising Occlumency as much as he wanted without any nasty side effects.

And he could tell his dad about what he was doing to protect him. Harry smiled in the dark and pictured what it would be like, what his dad would say to him when he saw how much he meant to Harry. He had a happy half hour imagining it.

The room had gone quiet. He sat up and reached through the curtain. On the bedside table was the Marauder's Map where he had put it earlier in the evening. He pulled it through. '*Lumos*,' he whispered, using his wand behind the drawn curtains. He scanned the old parchment. There it was—somewhere inside the area marked 'Forbidden Forest'—a small black dot labelled 'Severus Snape'. Neville had been right: Snape was there again. There was no other discernible speck nearby, none labelled 'James Potter' or anybody else. Maybe Snape was still waiting for him.

He extinguished his wand. Still in his school robes, he eased on his glasses then his shoes, careful not to wake anyone. Ron was snoring lightly as he crept past. He grabbed his outdoor cloak and stowed his wand inside.

As he stole down the numerous staircases to the front doors, he wished he had kept his Invisibility Cloak a little longer. It was better with his dad, of course, but ... His heart was thumping at the prospect of seeing his dad for the first time since ... well, ever, as far as he was concerned. Everything else had been either a cruel echo or an even crueller vision of what could never be.

But the tightness in his chest was not just because of that. He was heading toward Snape. In the Forbidden Forest. After curfew. With no Invisibility Cloak. He wondered whether he had a death wish; Snape could slaughter him then and there, and no one would be any the wiser. Maybe he should have told Ron where he was going first.

Too late now, he thought, as he heaved back the bolts to the main entrance. He squeezed through the gap before the old doors could creak and gave him away.

Besides, he assured himself, lighting his wand to find his way past the Quidditch pitch, the risk was worth it. Even the thought of the many man-eating creatures in the Forest could not deter him.

When he was at the Forest edge, he reluctantly put out his light. According to the Map, Snape was still around, somewhere just inside in this direction. But his dad was yet to arrive. And it was still too risky to be seen.

He trod gingerly over exposed roots of huge trees, their tall shadows crowding around, their dense crowns obliterating the stars. He eased along the path, letting his eyes adjust to the heavy darkness that closed in as he moved further into the deadened gloom. The fresh scent of damp foliage assaulted his senses.

From what he had seen of the Map, Snape was about twenty yards in and to the right of the path. He relit his wand to take another look. Shadows snapped into life under the strength of the light, and the Map slipped out of his hand.

He fell to his knees and scrambled around the vines twisting across the ground. He found the Map—and caught sight of a second black speck near Snape's.

He held his breath and peered closer, his heart hammering. But there was no name by it like there was for Snape's. He brought the Map nearer. His breath skimmed the parchment. The dot glided to the very edge of the Map—then slid to the ground.

*Idiot. It was only soil.* He swore at himself for getting excited over a stupid bit of dirt.

Burying his disappointment, he tucked the Map into his cloak and plunged into the dark with renewed determination. A dead branch nearly sent him to the ground. But he had reached the path, and he steered off to its right, gently swiping aside plants as he picked his way to Snape's location.

He was some way off the path when he heard the first twig.

*Snap!*

He froze. It had come from somewhere to his left. He strained to listen. The darkness was stifling, the shadows overwhelming. They seemed to creep into his soul—almost like Dementors, he thought, shivering in the cold night air, but without the horrifying accompanying memories. He stood for what felt an eternity waiting to make sure there was no vicious creature or...

*Snap!*

His breath quickened. He peered in the direction the sounds had come from. Whatever had caused them was getting closer, he was sure of it. He could see nothing but trees, their giant black figures sentinel-like, taunting him with visions of living things lurking behind their unyielding bodies. The cool wind stirred some nearby shrubbery, and over its soft hush, his chest beat a fast rhythm. He carefully drew his wand and pointed it where he had heard the twigs snap. They were resolutely silent now.

It was then a wild thought occurred to him: Maybe it was his dad arriving?

The feeling evolved into a conviction, and it descended on him like a fever. Any fear he'd had of encountering a bloodthirsty beast was burned away by the exhilaration, and a daring thrill overtook him. It was. It was his dad. He knew it. Snape was only just beyond those trees over to his right, so *it had* to be his dad coming to meet him. It *had* to be. 'Dad?' he whispered, hardly daring to hope for a reply.

An animal howled on the other side of the Forest, cutting through the suffocating silence and illustrating the enormity of the woods before him.

'Dad?' he tried again. 'Is that you?'

Nothing.

Far above, a breeze rustled through the treetops.

'It's me Harry.' He stepped forward, setting his foot on a rock, and slipped.

As he caught himself, a strong force yanked him by the collar of his cloak.

Choking as he was dragged backward, and striving to keep his footing as he went, he clung on to his wand while bramble after bramble jabbed into his sides. He tried to grab onto something. But the branches slapped at his arms and hands in admonishment as he was hauled away.