

Havoc of the Opera

by Roman

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

The Announcement

Chapter 1 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

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The staff and students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were gathered in the Great Hall, striving to show their heartiest disapproval of the Headmaster's latest folly. Professor Dumbledore had just finished his annual welcoming speech, warning the students of the usual dangers and introducing them to this year's program of studies. The students were not pleased.

'In light of recent events, and in face of the need to improve interhouse relationships, it has been decided that, this year, your ability to work in groups will be evaluated,' the headmaster had begun. 'As such, several activities have been discussed, according to your respective years, ages and general knowledge. Each group will comprise members of different houses.' At this point, he had pulled out a scroll, listing the activities for which they ought to ready. 'Sixth years: a production must be rehearsed for a mid-December performance. In two days' time, you shall be given a short list from which to choose the text you would prefer to stage. There are, however, a few rules,' he added, as Ravenclaw hands shot into the air. 'Students and teachers shall work together whether as members of the cast or crew is a decision for each group.'

The scowls of several teachers deepened to match the students', as McGonagall added that, due to their sheer number, they would have to split into two groups; Gryffindor would work with Slytherin, and Ravenclaw would work with Hufflepuff. She did not look pleased.

Ignoring the subtle groaning everywhere, Dumbledore resumed his speech. 'Should you endorse the aid of someone from outside your group or year, please do not forget that it will be a permanent change and that no project can proceed at the expense of another. As such, you must approach the staff with a formal request for a guest our word on the matter will be final. All teachers, Heads of house included, may join either group, regardless of their own houses.'

The displeasure was now audible the Hufflepuffs were intimidated of working with the intellectually superior Ravenclaws; the Ravenclaws feared a lowering of standards for the Hufflepuffs' sake; the Gryffindors would join the Death Eaters rather than the Slytherins; the Slytherins reciprocated the feeling.

Completely undisturbed by the general wariness, Dumbledore described the activity and working conditions assigned to the seventh year, addressing all students with a final statement, 'You may discuss your assignments for a few minutes before leaving for your dormitories, if you so wish. You might also want to be quick in choosing the teachers with whom you wish to work. You heavily outnumber our staff, and some assignments will demand undivided attention. Your decisions on these matters will reflect strongly on your marks. Any questions?'

A few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were already dragging the two central tables together to discuss their assignments properly, and glimpses of contentment here and there

denounced the hope that this peculiar interaction with the teachers might even be fun. If worst came to worst, there would be equal blames to assign, and that, at least, sounded promising.

But both Gryffindor and Slytherin remained frozen, apparently still registering the news. The youngest members of both Houses looked at their glowering elders for instructions.

Padma Patil, a sixth year Ravenclaw, raised her arm. 'Headmaster, sir, if our play is to take up most of our Head of house's free time, how can we I do wish to work with him...!' she clarified hastily, earning a thoroughly unoffended wave from Professor Flitwick. He rather liked the idea of working with his children. 'But he'll be supervising the other years' activities, as will every teacher we approach.'

It was Flitwick's squeaky voice that answered her. 'Miss Patil, the Heads of house will supervise every single project, of every year, so the sixth years must understand that we're not at your sole disposal. We hope the other teachers won't be forgot in your requests, for they will surely be more available than us.' Although he sounded supremely worried with the prospect of aiding hordes of students at a time, he added, 'But I'm sure that we'll be able to work around time and schedule constraints.'

Hermione's hand shot up. 'Professor,' she addressed her Head of house, 'are we expected to put on a professional-level show? The Gryffindor and Slytherin schedules clash most of the time, now, and we spend very little time together...' That, as far as the Gryffindors were concerned, was the best part of their freshly delivered post-OWL schedules.

McGonagall's answer only brought along more laments. 'You shall work on your assignments during your spare time, including weekends, for a minimum of two hours every day.'

The Quidditch teams rebelled. 'What about Quidditch? And our practice? Don't we matter?'

It was now Madam Hooch's turn to speak. 'On Saturday and Sunday mornings, the Quidditch players are allowed to skip interhouse work in order to practice. I suggest you assign the players smaller parts in your projects, or at least that you find potential replacements among freer classmates.'

Ron's eyes shone, seemingly prompting McGonagall to add, 'Still, we expect the Quidditch players will work as hard as their classmates. Bear in mind that evaluation is individual, and it will focus heavily on the amount of work due and done by each of you, as well as your commitment to the task. Anyone who tries to weasel out of the responsibility will answer to me,' she finished with a scorching look. This time, no groans followed. Ron's face, along with several others, fell. Draco Malfoy, surrounded by his gang that is, most of the Slytherin sixth year had been fuming since the announcement had begun.

Blaise Zabini, the first Slytherin to speak up, addressed Dumbledore. 'Headmaster, how do we deal with this if the assigned groups simply can't manage to work together?'

Dumbledore's eyes roamed all tables before he answered casually, 'Well, the tasks have been devised to help you work together. I'm afraid those unable to "manage" that, even for a better mark, will have to "deal" with losing half of it. Of the mark, I mean.'

Hermione looked so horrified that she seemed ready to befriend Lord Voldemort himself in exchange for her perfect record. Ron followed her as she walked resolutely up to the Slytherins. Harry accompanied them, wondering how a show would help him get along with the Death Eaters In Training. Seamus and Neville got to their feet, and then their whole year followed them across the Hall. The Slytherins, having half-heartedly conjured a longer bench for them, began to welcome their new workmates. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle didn't budge.

Hermione, ignoring Pansy Parkinson's pointed jibes, had already introduced herself and a few others to a group of sixth years who had been gracious enough to stand.

'...if our classes end at the same time, we could schedule the rehearsals... say, from five to eight every day?' she was suggesting. Blaise Zabini pointed out that three-hour-long rehearsals would leave them no time for homework. She was slightly taken aback.

'Well, we do have a lot to do for the performance, and with detentions and whatnot, we're bound to have people arriving late or leaving early...'

'...and this way we might manage to keep everyone there at least for two full hours, I see. Perhaps if we make it clear that it's a compulsory two-hour rehearsal plus an extra hour for warm-ups and the like?'

As others timidly joined their discussion, Malfoy raised his glare from Ginny she and Dean Thomas were prattling happily with a third year Slytherin they both knew and said in a loud, bored voice, 'I suggest you don't forget we need teachers in this thing and they have different schedules. By the way, we want Professor Snape to be part of this, er... this.'

Ron glared at him. 'Do we, now?'

'Also, you'd do well to remember several of us are Quidditch players,' Draco gave Ron a dirty look, plainly showing what he thought of his Quidditch skills, 'and we need time for practice.'

Hermione huffed. 'You've just been given free weekend mornings, Malfoy, and if you think we're about to jeopardise our classes and the performance so that you can play with your broomstick...' An indignant choir of players, which Harry didn't bother to join, drowned her voice.

When they quieted down, Malfoy continued, 'The teachers know absolutely nothing about Quidditch. Two mornings a week is warm-up, not practice. Madam Hooch will be the first to demand more commitment, as soon as the season begins.'

Hermione glared at Ron, who was about to open his mouth, and only did so after backing away a little. 'Erm... you know, he has a point, Hermione. Two mornings is... We'll need a full afternoon, at least, and a few more hours every week. It's the Quidditch Cup, Hermione, that's important for us, too,' he finished, seemingly unfazed by his own defence of Malfoy's point.

Harry, who had been scowling since the early mention of Professor Snape, furrowed his brow even more deeply and remained quiet. Hermione, however, didn't. 'And what do you propose to do? Inform the teachers that we can't fit their rehearsals in our tight schedule and perhaps suggest they go bother someone who has more time to spare?'

'It would be amusing to tell them that in those exact terms, with your best regards, Granger, but I happen to treasure my marks. So I suggest we remind the teachers that we have very busy days, and request rehearsals from nine to midnight, and weekend rehearsals from three to ten. That should give us some free time during the week.' Malfoy sat with a smug expression, glaring indifferently at the Weasleys around.

Harry, in turn, glared at him, and an awkward mood settled, broken by Hermione and a pragmatic group, who analysed Malfoy's suggestion. Hermione disliked the prospect of requesting after-curfew rehearsals, others reminded her that they were old enough to make their way to bed unsupervised until they were all ushered out.

Between their first classes of the year and assorted meetings, the next day passed quickly. The teachers were delighted with the odd vision of students waiting outside the other houses' classrooms to discuss stray points after class. It was strangely alluring to see Slytherins and Gryffindors talking in a civilised way, although the younger students seemed to be adapting more easily than their elders. Children up to the fourth year were escorting each other to their respective classes, albeit stiffly, but hardly any sixth and seventh years mirrored their behaviour. Only Hermione and Blaise (now regarded by the Gryffindors as a male, Slytherin, version of her) kept the news flowing, transmitting interhouse messages and drafting an official letter, to be delivered to the headmaster that evening.

So far, it had been decided that both McGonagall and Snape would be part of their project, though their exact capacity was of yet unknown. The Slytherins had unanimously refused to do without their Head of house, and the Gryffindors couldn't even think of facing Snape without McGonagall's presence.

This prompted Harry to seriously consider failing the subject, but Hermione set him straight with a glare so scathing that he instead focused on defending the guest spot to

which the Slytherins objected the most.

'And why, pray tell, do we need another Weasley?' Malfoy had scorned.

'Our female quota is good enough that we don't need to scour the lower years,' Pansy Parkinson had piped in.

'Oh, we'll need to scour them well for girls who won't feel tainted by your company,' Ron snapped back, scribbling Ginny's name on their improvised guest list. Malfoy didn't bother to defend his girlfriend.

Such was the tenor of the day's discussions. By dinner time, Madam Pomfrey had provided most students with potions and charms to ease the migraines. Some, who had mentioned the possibility of '...being sent to Azkaban', were granted a Draught of Peace. All in all, they arrived at the Great Hall unscathed.

Dinner was uneventful. An enormous amount of letters had been poured by four houses onto the headmaster's plate. Dumbledore spent half his meal unscrolling them and pointing out the odd passage to the staff. With Flitwick, Hooch and Sprout as honourable exceptions, the teachers weren't quite as excited as he.

'Very well, then,' he said, 'we're glad to see you taking your tasks so seriously.' Harry squinted and he thought he could see steam coming out of Malfoy's ears. 'As well as enjoying them!' Malfoy was surely trying to kill the Headmaster with a glare. It had to be the first time in his life, but Harry silently wished him good luck.

'Tomorrow night, we shall share our decisions on your requests, and give you new information, such as the list of books for the first years' essays, the list of texts for the sixth years...' Dumbledore rambled on about all that they would be learning the next day, which Harry found a tremendous waste of time, and they were finally dismissed. Barely a day had passed, and the year ahead already looked too long.

The second day, too, was unremarkable. First class was Double Potions, and Neville, whose bravery and mind still ran off together whenever in the same room as Snape, was still aquiver when they entered the Transfigurations classroom. Why Snape had taken him in for NEWTs level was a mystery. The common assumption was that the man needed someone new to vent at, now that he had taken to pretending that Harry was invisible. As for himself, Harry was sure Snape's goodwill wasn't the reason he was still attending Potions. His impeccable 'O' in his Potions OWL positively reeked of Dumbledore's influence.

McGonagall's lecture rang in his ears long after class had ended. But what fault did he have that his tiny bat had chosen to dive into a cauldron instead of turning into one?

History of Magic provided them with a welcome nap after lunch. Harry only wished Hermione would stop gossiping with Blaise over the windowsill of the ground floor room. It was hard to sleep with Ron swearing every five minutes.

Charms was quite regular. After a dozen tries, everybody was still doing everything wrong, whereas Hermione had perfected the new charm in her very first attempt.

Dinner was served in the Great Hall, where now sat two very large tables instead of the usual set of four. Hermione virtually bounced with curiosity, and this time, a few anxious faces mirrored hers. But Dumbledore made them wait until after dessert to tell them all that they needed to know, and possibly quite a bit more.

'...Sixth years, we have analysed your requests, and I must say I only recall seeing you so committed to a task when you were disrupting the existence of your former Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers which reminds me of this anecdote--' McGonagall coughed lightly. 'Erm... yes, well... let's start with the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs, then. Professors Flitwick and Sprout have accepted your invitation.' The two houses beamed. 'And Professors Hooch, McGonagall and Binns are at your disposal if further cooperation is needed. Miss Bones, as for your request for magical creatures... due to the uncertainty of their behaviour in captivity, do try to do without them.' Susan blushed crimson and sank into her seat.

'By the way, Professor McGonagall, is Professor Hagrid still having trouble preventing our large host of animal friends from taking a stroll inside the castle? I really don't know how the children can be expected to get rid of them, should they take to a particular room...' Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh and winked at poor Susan, who smiled timidly back and straightened herself a little.

'Mr Boot, I can't see why you are so sure that broomsticks will be needed, but should you use them I now address you all you must place a protective charm around the audience seats. Every time a student flies in the Great Hall, people end up in the hospital wing with broomsticks stuck in the oddest places. Most uncomfortable, that.'

Now turning to his left, Dumbledore addressed the Gryffindors and the Slytherins, who were stiff in their seats, awkwardly attempting casual conversation. Malfoy glared at Ginny's hair. 'Ahem. Likewise, your Heads of house have accepted your invitation, and Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, Hagrid,' half the Slytherins scowled, 'and Hooch will be at your disposal. We see no problem in inviting Miss Weasley to join you we can't, however, say the same of young Mr Creevey. I'm afraid he and his ever-present camera,' Colin flushed, 'will be quite vital for the fifth years' graphic exposition.' Colin flushed again, this time with pleasure. 'So far, so good. Now... about those late-night rehearsals...'

'Late-night?!' Pansy mouthed soundlessly. 'Nine o'clock is "late-night"?! That old coot!' Hermione glowered at her with an eerily know-it-all look. Of course the headmaster wouldn't let them wander around the halls so late.

'We aren't entirely comfortable with the idea of you, any of you, alone in the halls at night. Still, we appreciate your efforts in accommodating all your other commitments and the rehearsals, and we will accept your timetable under a few security conditions...'

He had to stop because the two Houses were cheering too loudly. The younger students gazed at the sixth years with deep envy, and even the seventh years looked slightly jealous. Hermione was thoroughly shocked. They were *allowed* to break curfew? Ron nudged her, beaming for the first time since the play talks had begun, Blaise winked at her, granting her the second shock of the evening, and even Malfoy put on a ghost of a smile although his steadfast glare at Ginny gave it a rather disturbing aura.

'*A-he-hem*,' the headmaster called, 'such enthusiasm. I'm glad. Now, about those security conditions without which there will be absolutely-no-nightly-rehearsals...' They regained some composure, still nudging each other under the table. There was no memory of students formally allowed to be out of their dormitories at night, let alone of the staff making arrangements for it.

'The corridors and adjacencies can be rather dangerous at night, and those who haven't yet heeded this warning must do so now more than ever. Students are not to wander alone through the corridors. Miss Granger, Miss Parkinson, Mr Malfoy and Mr Weasley have all been made prefects last year, and one of them, at least, will accompany his or her colleagues in and out of the rehearsal room.' The latter three groaned. 'So do try to arrive or leave in groups, rather than alone. Ideally, in fact, two of you would accompany your colleagues, but you will soon be in drowning in work, and one might be all you can spare.'

Malfoy crossed his arms and transferred his glare to Dean Thomas. 'No rule can possibly make me act as a nanny for you lot, just so you know.'

Hermione threw him a murderous glance. "Don't worry, *Draco*, if you're scared of walking people around on your own, we'll all go with you, and make you feel safer.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Well, you seem incapable of taking a step without your cronies, so we figured you'd feel better with us around. Everything for your comfort,' she added acidly, turning her back to him.

Before he could retort, Dumbledore spoke up again, listing the texts that the staff had selected for them. Predictably, the Gryffindors found the list too short, and the Slytherins thought it was too Muggle-infested. It included a political play, Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a musical, the stage adaptation of 'the French wizard Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, and a number of works known only to a very select group.

'And lastly, one for the courageous only,' Dumbledore chirped, in a tone that boded nothing good. 'A former student of ours, who chose to forgo what would doubtlessly have been a brilliant career in the Department of International Magic Cooperation for a new and exciting life as a film maker among the Muggles, has recently informed me of his newest project. I found it very interesting, and he graciously allowed us to use his text for this specific endeavour. Therefore, those of you who are sufficiently brave might want to tackle the script for *Moulin Rouge*.'

Hermione pointed out that the list was of a rather adult nature, but no one paid attention to her; the Muggle-borns were attempting to introduce the purebloods to the concepts of 'musical', 'script' and 'film maker'.

After a short discussion, Malfoy informed them that they were performing *The Phantom of the Opera*, and that the matter was closed.

'Why?' Ron grumbled. 'You like it? Then I don't want it.'

'Never heard of it,' Malfoy smirked, 'but a wizard who didn't desert his own kin wrote it, so we're picking that one.' He crossed his arms and looked around defiantly.

Ron's mouth was open already, but Harry put a hand on his shoulder and gave his very first input for the project. 'Let's just get this over with. Whatever keeps them happy. Who cares which text we stage, anyway? Can't get much worse than this.' He gazed grimly at the staff table, from where Snape was surveying their discussion, looking almost as sour as Harry. They locked glares for a moment.

Hermione rubbed her temples. 'Okay, then, if everyone agrees, we're staging *Phantom*. Personally, I think it's the best option, I just hope the other group doesn't choose it, too.'

'What if they do?' Malfoy asked, now glaring at the other table over the top of Ginny's head. 'They'll just have to unchoose it.'

In the meantime, the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs were excitedly discussing their choices.

'We can't choose this one, there are babies in it--'

'We could de-age people--'

'Really large cast--'

'We could use holograms...'

'What's that?' a pureblood asked.

'It's a bit like a hallucination...'

'Hallucination?!'

'Forget it.'

'There's a dwarf in *Moulin Rouge*, Professor Flitwick could play him!'

'What if they choose it first?'

A few minutes later, Dumbledore made himself heard again. 'Have you all made your choices? Miss Brocklehurst?' he demanded, turning to the table on his right.

Mandy Brocklehurst stammered for a moment, surprised to be addressed by the headmaster, and Lisa Turpin shouted excitedly, *Moulin Rouge!*, lowering her voice immediately, 'Erm. We would like to stage *Moulin Rouge!*, if there's no problem, headmaster.'

'None at all, Miss Turpin.' He turned to the left. 'You?'

'We have decided to stage *The Phantom of the Opera*, sir.'

'Very well.' He beamed. 'If my memory does not trick me, tomorrow there are no classes in the afternoon. I suggest you use it for your first auditions. You have chosen two character-heavy plays, and I dare predict many headaches ahead.'

A few students exchanged worried looks, but the general mood was now of optimism and defiance.

'I imagine that by Friday night you'll have a clearer idea of the materials you will need. We will provide you with them,' avid looks were exchanged, 'within reason, of course.' Faces fell. 'Material will be brought in from outside of the school only if absolutely necessary. We don't want to dampen one group's ambitions due to the other's better resources,' he concluded, looking intently at a certain blond Slytherin.

'Now, seventh years...'

Fifteen minutes later, they were dismissed. Blaise walked the Gryffindors upstairs, chatting with Hermione on the way, until the Gryffindors let him know that from a particular flight of stairs up, no non-Gryffindors were allowed. Blaise stopped and waited for Neville, who had walked a few Slytherins back to the dungeons, along with Seamus and Dean. Meanwhile, in the common room, Ron was telling Harry about how he really, really didn't like Blaise.

Finding the Leads

Chapter 2 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Wednesday afternoon came, and Harry and Ron were late. Their essay on the ethical issues of the use of the Impedimenta Charm, due the next day, had completely slipped their minds, and they had had to sprint upstairs after a quick lunch to finish it. When they returned to the Great Hall, it was morphing into a gigantic rehearsal room.

'Kindly step away from the benches and do not stand between the tables and the walls,' McGonagall bellowed, transfiguring the four benches into two sets of armchairs and sliding the two enormous house tables against opposite walls. Flitwick then conjured something akin to a pale grey curtain, which hung from the ceiling and stretched out, reaching the floor and the walls, splitting the Hall in two smaller rooms. They now stood in one of them, observing as the top halves of the House tables covered the length of the walls and disappeared under the curtain. One of the sets of armchairs, too, had disappeared. Only the staff table remained in its rightful place.

'What's this for?' Ron asked, catching Lavender's eye.

'Oh,' giggled a beaming Lavender, 'no other place was big enough, so we split the Great Hall in two and kept the top half because we'll need the raised platform,' she pointed to the staff table, 'and the others said they needed the Entrance Hall's stairs and the oak doors, and...'

Ron's mind spun at the speed with which she spoke. McGonagall's commanding voice sent the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs to their room beyond the curtain, along with their heads of house and several other teachers. Only McGonagall, Snape, Hooch and Dumbledore stayed. But Dumbledore swiftly apologised for having limited time with each group and retreated to the other room. As the curtain fell into place, no further sound came from beyond.

'Why can't we hear them?' Harry enquired.

'Even you must recognise a Silencing Spell, Potter,' Malfoy emerged to the left of the staff table, holding a notebook.

There were faint shadows ahead, as though a thick fog had descended on the other group. 'We might be able to hear something if they shout very loudly. Security measure,' he added in a distasteful tone.

'What's that?' asked Ron, pointing to his notebook. Malfoy just tilted his head towards the stack of similar notebooks resting on the staff table and joined a group of Slytherins who were appraisingly poring over a single notebook.

'Harry, Ron, over here!' Seamus, Neville and Dean waved. They had somehow disentangled a few chairs from the set and were trying to get to Ginny, who had already sat neatly against a wall, engrossed in her notebook. It was their script.

Harry and Ron picked one for each of them and joined the others.

'I thought they'd be bigger,' Seamus observed.

'They're big enough,' Ron sighed, 'have you seen these neverending monologues?'

'Monologues?' Ginny glanced at his open script. 'Ron, those are the musical numbers, and they're shorter than they seem.'

'Musical numbers?' Ron repeated in a hollow voice. 'We have to sing?!'

'Well, it's a musical. Hermione posted a synopsis of it in our message board.'

'I didn't see that!' Ron's voice was now laced with panic.

'Then you should have. There were also character profiles, a list of musical numbers...'

'Where's Hermione, by the way?' Harry chimed in. Ginny pointed to the opposite table. Hermione, Blaise and Snape appeared to be discussing one of the passages of the play. Harry's spirits sank at the sight of their teacher.

'They can't have that much to talk about,' Ron grumbled, the songs fleeing his mind at once as he glared fiercely at the trio.

He couldn't have guessed it, but he wasn't alone in his feelings. To their left, a white-blond head observed Blaise and Hermione with an expression carved out of utter repulsion.

Dumbledore emerged from the opaque barrier, clapping his hands. 'Haven't you started yet? The others already have the leads!' Hermione started, frenziedly handing out scripts. A nervous shuffle of footsteps later, they had all sat with scripts in their laps, waiting for instructions. The staff table slid to the sidewall, leaving them a 'stage' for the auditions.

'We... we have to go up there?' Ron stammered, looking positively terrified.

'Of course, Mr. Weasley. You'll have to audition somewhere!'

'I was thinking maybe... we could audition alone...?'

'Alone?' countered a perplexed McGonagall.

'Yes, well, not totally alone, of course, just with the teachers, without...'

'... witnesses? Are you that bad?' Malfoy really didn't look as confident as he sounded.

'Ye-- no. Not really,' Ron said firmly, glowering at him. 'I just think we'd feel better without everybody staring at us. It's unnerving enough as it is...'

'I'm sure it is, particularly for those of you who have never stepped on a stage.' Dumbledore sounded almost pitying. 'But I'm afraid these auditions will result in a performance for the whole school, and as such...' Ron's face had grown progressively grey and now it matched the barrier behind him.

'I didn't know he had stage fright,' Hermione whispered in Harry's ear as Dumbledore spurred them on rather loudly.

'There's no need to be nervous. None of us expect you to be consummate professionals. Half the point is that you have fun.'

'Fun?!' Ron gasped. 'Fun!?!'

'Should we begin with the main lead?' Blaise enquired.

'I believe we should start with Christine Daaé, Mr Zabini,' McGonagall countered. Blaise thought for a moment and then nodded in agreement.

'And that would be...?' Draco asked.

'The female lead. She's the connection between the characters, and everybody has to be cast around her. I agree with the professor. We have to find Christine first,' Hermione informed him without thinking. Upon meeting his eyes, she caught herself and looked straight ahead, lips pursed. Malfoy smirked.

'Professor, will we all audition?' Harry uncomfortably addressed the Headmaster.

Malfoy sneered. 'For the female lead, Potter?'

Harry glowered at him and clarified, 'Will everybody audition, for one role or another?'

'I imagine the auditions may end when the right people are cast. We won't force you to audition,' McGonagall replied. Ron looked immensely relieved. "But those left out of the cast will be part of the crew.'

Dumbledore sat expectantly. 'Well, do we have any prospective Christines? Remember, we can magically enhance the shakier voices, but it would be preferable to give full use to your own talents. Miss Parkinson, will you do the honours?'

Pansy stepped onto the improvised stage, a small smile playing on her lips.

She had an extraordinary voice. The audition song, *Think of Me*, had been deemed sufficiently challenging yet not overly demanding, as well as a good sum-up of Christine's motivations. As sung by Pansy, however, it now sounded unimaginably difficult. When she breezed through the glass-shattering cadenza as though it were a mere warm-up, muttered complaints arose that she must have enhanced her voice earlier on.

'I don't care how high-pitched her voice is, it's never carried that way. It has to have been tampered with...!' Lavender commented. There were emphatic nods of agreement.

Meanwhile, onstage, Pansy had moved on to the spoken piece: a passage of Christine's conversation with Raoul, her love interest. Blaise was there, running Raoul's lines for her. Malfoy sat in the front row, listening to the perplexed comments. Only when they quieted down to observe the rest of her audition did he look over his shoulder and casually let out that Pansy had had singing lessons since she was little, and that, no, she had no need to tamper with it.

'Why on earth did she have singing lessons?' Ginny asked. 'Can't see her wanting to sing for a living.'

'It's common practice, among the well-bred, to be proficient in the arts from a very young age,' he clarified, looking disdainfully at those less wealthy around him.

'Did you have singing lessons, too?' Ron snapped, stung.

'But of course,' came the unfazed answer, 'among others.'

'Dark Arts?' Ron suggested, leering.

Malfoy smirked. "No. But I could, had I wanted to. Some of us can afford them.'

Only the teachers' severe looks stopped Ron from wiping the smirk off Malfoy's face.

Given their short supply of girls, half of them instantly dismissed, casting Christine took much longer than they had anticipated. Some girls had been called back Pansy returned to the stage three times and now Ginny was there for the second time, attempting a few bars of the main love song, *All I Ask of You*. She had a hushed, pleasant voice that couldn't hold a candle to Pansy's. Rather obviously, too, it wasn't fit for Christine's demands. Topping it off, Ginny had prefaced her audition with a complaint about Christine's melodramatic nature and her overwrought attitudes.

Hermione then took the limelight for the first time she had been acting as a consultant about the script's finer points as the other girls auditioned. She, too, was miles behind Pansy, but her voice was warm, steady and alluring. It did waver a bit in the very highest and lowest notes.

Christine was cast around five-thirty. In an attempt to keep envy and malice out of the decisions, they had agreed that individual opinions would be voiced, but men would have final say in the casting of female characters and vice-versa. Consensus among the boys was that it was a shame that Pansy couldn't even pretend to muster Christine's timid, serene charm. Her brisk, snappy Christine, fine singer though she was, was an operatic version of Pansy herself. Ultimately, it had been agreed that Christine's core had been best captured by Hermione. Her voice's shortcomings were a concern for later stages.

Rather predictably, Pansy's tetchy approach made her the perfect Carlotta Giudicelli, the opera's *prima donna*, and Christine's biggest foe. Both girls rejoiced with the decisions. Having cast two characters in one go, the group patted each other on the back.

Casting the Phantom and Raoul, Vicomte de Chagny, was quicker, yet just as tricky. The rather generic part of Raoul still demanded a graceful, charming actor who wasn't tone-deaf and who could convince the audience that Christine would be better off with him than in the Phantom's obsessive embrace. Blaise was the obvious choice, but he eyed Hermione apologetically and confessed that he couldn't act to save his life. 'And I nurture the deepest disdain for a soul like Raoul's,' he added.

It was only after a great deal of insistence that he acceded to read out the spoken piece. He hadn't lied. He was awful. Eventually, he went back to his seat as a newly appointed crew member, fairly content to remain out of the spotlight. Hermione, running Christine's lines in aid of the prospective Raouls, smiled at him encouragingly and readied for the next one. Ron.

Her loving exchanges with Blaise seemed to have snapped the stage fright out of Ron, who strode palely onstage and barely looked her in the eye the whole time he was there. Were he not so anxious, he would have been quite passable. Unfortunately, deep inside, he seemed to share Blaise's feelings towards Raoul's romantic nature.

Malfoy's (rather reluctant) audition was a quick one. He sped through the preamble to *All I Ask of You* and proceeded to sing its first bars with his eyes trained on Hermione. In the process, he seemed to have transfigured into a loving suitor with a gentle, modulated voice rather than a cynical drawl. His was also the last audition for Raoul. The part was instantly his.

Parvati was even irresponsible enough to sigh that they made 'such a cute couple', earning a double glare from the pair onstage and Ron and Pansy in the audience. Blaise's sole reaction was a slight tightening of the lips.

'Well, they do,' Parvati muttered defensively. Only Hermione and Pansy opposed his casting. Pansy whinged that Raoul and Carlotta barely interacted. Hermione, who had been mere feet from him, and thus had seen him keep his distance even as the script told him to move closer, who had remarked on his tense hands, and his twitching lips, simply commented that he had '... no bodily expression to speak of, and an indifferent tone.'

'Hermione, I can assure you that from an audience's point of view, he was perfectly believable,' Lavender sighed. 'The way he looked at you!'

He wasn't looking at me! He was looking at Ginny! Hermione wanted to shriek. She took a deep breath and calmly pointed out, 'He was looking over my shoulder all the time. Will he be doing that during the performance? What a smash that will be. We should pick somebody else for Raoul. Or Christine,' she added rather sadly.

Malfoy passed by, pausing beside her. 'This is schoolwork and I'm not stupid, Granger. I'll pretend to adore you for as long as necessary, so if you will please stop whining. It's not like I'm thrilled to be whoring myself out to a Mudblood every time the teachers snap their fingers.' The last sentence was such a low hiss that only Hermione heard it. Malfoy slid back into his place, colliding with Seamus on the way.

It was now six-thirty and the teachers, taking pity on them, had a snack brought in. Dinner was apparently unlikely. They ate enthusiastically, commenting on the recent casting decisions. The staff, too, conferenced, and when the plates were empty, Ginny was called back onstage.

'Miss Weasley, would you sing this for us? Take your time.'

Ginny read the lines to herself a few times, and then began, *Where in the world have you been hiding? Really, you are perfect!* She turned to Hermione with a small note of wonder. *I only wish I knew your secret! Who is this new tutor?*

Professor Dumbledore beamed. 'I do believe we've found our Meg Giry. Provided Miss Weasley accepts the part, of course...' Ginny, who much preferred Meg to Christine,

knew better than to refuse. She stepped offstage, straight into her brother's arms. Ron was so proud of her he had even stopped sulking.

This left them with the one real problem. The Phantom. Because he was supposedly much older than the romantic leads, it was agreed that whoever played him would be magically aged, and every boy was to audition. None was fit for the part. By ten in the evening, Goyle's deep voice had begun to sound like an acceptable reason to give him the part.

Even Harry had auditioned. He was quite good as the long-suffering, lovesick composer, but he lacked presence. He simply wasn't intimidating, or brooding, or scary. He wasn't their Phantom.

One hour later, they were frantically looking for a loophole in the script. In the course of the evening, they had re-baptised the other group 'The Bohemians' whilst calling themselves 'The Classics', and someone was now suggesting, "We could always ask the Bohemians to lend us an actor... maybe you could ask your sister, Parvati... Parvati?!"

Parvati stared at the staff table, script abandoned on her lap, open in the *Performance of Il Muto*. She stood and, in a timid voice that the group only miraculously managed to hear, asked, "Professor Snape, would you please read a section of this scene for us?"

The sound of all necks creaking as one echoed like the prophecy of doom in the heavy silence. Snape looked at Parvati as though she should be shipped to St. Mungo's at once. Harry had an urge to murder her. Had anyone looked at him at that moment, he would be immediately cast as the Phantom. Was it not enough that he and that man had to sit in the same room? Parvati was now under the glare Snape usually saved for Neville on a bad day.

Oddly enough, somebody had liked the suggestion a ball of bushy hair grabbed Parvati's script and run to the staff table. Assorted passages were shoved under the nose of a very shirty Professor Snape, who turned to the Headmaster with a silent plea for help. But Dumbledore smiled unsettlingly, trying to reason with the younger teacher. It was rather like convincing a child that medicine is tasty.

"Yes, Severus, do try. Wonderful, it will be wonderful you're an excellent actor. You'll enjoy it. Do it." It appeared Dumbledore thought Christmas had come four months early. His tone also bore a hint of non-negotiable finality that wasn't lost on Harry.

Snape gazed at him in mingled disgust and defeat. "Wonderful, publicly seducing a student for the next few months? I'm certainly glad somebody will be enjoying it," he spat venomously, "and words such as "seduction" will have to enter your vocabulary if you really want this to happen, Miss Granger, so please not to be blushing," he added with a glare that could wither stone.

"But, Severus, it's a play," McGonagall attempted to reason.

"She is being graded, not I. This will go well beyond a teacher/student relationship, and it will be a humiliating experience for both of us," he countered in one breath.

"Well, she is sixteen, not quite a child." Hermione was crimson. "And I'm sure you're both mature enough to see the positive side of the experience, if you're open to it. If your minds are open, I mean. You might even learn a thing or two."

Mischief glinted in Dumbledore's eye. Everybody gaped at him, even the Bloody Baron, who had accompanied Nick upstairs to check on their houses' progresses. Harry had never seen such mass embarrassment in Slytherin house.

Snape was fuming. He mentally counted to ten, then ripped the script out of Hermione's hands and glided onstage with a homicidal aura around him. Several students were clearly questioning the wisdom of remaining in his reach. Long minutes went by as Snape scanned the script with his back to the students, who were more unsettled by the minute. When he finally turned to face them, his face was inscrutable.

If Malfoy's audition had shocked them, this one positively bewildered them. Snape really appeared to be morphing it happened so slowly that it only became noticeable once the process was complete, that his expression, his whole physicality, had changed. He stood to his full height, with a hint of pride as he leaned towards Hermione, gesturing smoothly to show her things only he could see, his arms leading her body this or that way without really touching her.

Even his voice had changed. Gone was the cold note that it held even when directing a compliment at his precious Slytherins. It took Harry a moment to realise why it sounded so odd. Snape was singing. He had picked the Phantom's song, *The Music of the Night*, and was now dripping the words into Hermione's ear in a half-sung, half-spoken tone so low that only she could really understand the words. The rest of them knew she was hearing something mesmerising, but they didn't know what it was.

Hermione seemed to be spellbound. Of course, Christine really was, but Hermione no longer seemed to be in-character. When Snape had first leaned in, his hand nearly touching her neck, she had instinctively stiffened, but as that voice that could not be his, just inches from her, began to cast its spell, she forgot all about Christine.

When the song was over, he had to cough loudly to jerk the audience back to their senses. Many fidgeted in embarrassment. Hermione jumped, her head collided with Snape's shoulder, and she stammered an apology, blushing to the very white of her eye. He merely scowled and made his way back to the staff table, defying the headmaster who was stifling chuckles behind his own script to say a word. McGonagall, her cheeks unusually flushed, cleared her throat. "Shall I take this silence to mean that Professor Snape has been approved as the Phantom?"

There were scattered nods, but most people were still staring at their Potions master, who had turned his back to them and was sulking beside Dumbledore. It was hard to let it sink in that he had acted like an appealing human being.

Harry blamed their enthrallment on the song, and a few of his mates supported him surely, that song would have made even Flitwick's squeaky voice sound wondrous.

"Well, five characters down," Madam Hooch said brightly, "and it's half past eleven already. I suggest we have a good night's sleep and finish the auditions tomorrow."

Everyone began to gather their belongings, but McGonagall still had something to say. "Just a second. This is important. While you were all choosing the players, we talked a bit about the understudies. They should be cast now, so that everyone may start studying their parts at the same time."

"Underwhat?" Ron asked, bedazzled. Hermione instantly slipped into top-of-class mode and succinctly explained the concept.

"Now, do you care to know who your understudies will be or not?" McGonagall asked briskly. They waited, stifling yawns. Right then, they could only care to understudy their own beds.

"Well, then, the understudy for Christine Daaé will be Parvati Patil; for Raoul, Ron Weasley; for Carlotta, Lavender Brown; for the Phantom, Harry Potter. Other understudies will be chosen as they become necessary. We'll leave those up to you. Good night to you all." She whirled out of the room, swiftly followed by the other teachers. Snape was last, and Harry quickly realised, from the utter loathing in his teacher's expression, that this understudy business meant that they would be spending time together. What a joyful prospect.

Harry didn't even know why Snape needed an understudy, if he had been so good. If he didn't need a great mark in Transfigurations to even be considered for Auror training, Harry would have vowed to become the most insufferable student McGonagall had ever known.

Ron observed his deepening scowl sympathetically. "Does it make you feel better to think of me rehearsing with Malfoy?"

Harry groaned. They walked out miserably, surrounded by displeased Slytherins the decision to pick only Gryffindors as understudies had not been popular and the Great Hall was soon empty. In the ensuing silence, they could still hear the Bohemians, rehearsing happily across the barrier, "...spectacular, no word in the vernacular can describe this great event..."

'That's for sure,' Harry thought grimly as Ron tugged on his sleeve. 'What?'

Following Ron's gaze, he saw Hermione and Blaise taking the longer path towards the dungeons. Ron ran up to them and insisted on going with them. Hermione tried to dissuade him, but he just reminded her of the headmaster's orders and walked on. Harry bade everybody a quick good night and made for the stairs. Something told him a storm was about to begin in the dungeons.

Ron's decision, however, left them with no prefects for the Gryffindors, and after a long and noisy discussion, a heavily sulking Malfoy stood next to Harry, ready to escort the others upstairs. Pansy had already left, and thus didn't see this development. Another reason to steer clear of the dungeons. Ron, still within earshot of the argument, silently trusted Harry not to let Malfoy lay his paws on Ginny, and on he went, leading a furious Hermione and a dignified Blaise downstairs.

Malfoy walked as far away from Harry as he could, and, it seemed, as close to Ginny as possible. He seemed to be enjoying the fact that his every step made her glower more deeply. There was general relief when he stopped where Blaise had. Harry slipped into bed as soon as he could, all his bones aching with repressed fury. They were working with the Slytherins. He had to work with Snape. He had to work with Snape *every day*. He was done in.

Despite his exhaustion, Harry was unable to sleep. Malfoy's presence had made him recall a tiny moment of the afternoon. Just after his audition, even before glaring at Hermione, Malfoy had cast the smallest glance towards the staff table, receiving a curt nod from Snape. Harry was sure of this, because Pansy had done the same thing, more exuberantly, and it had been her odd attitude that had drawn his attention to the Slytherins' auditions. Blaise had done it, too and Goyle, and the rest of them. Before anything other, they all turned to Snape. To see what he thought. To seek his approval. Snape had responded to all of them even Crabbe, who had been pitiful.

There was something inherently wrong with the thought of people seeking Snape's approval. That was a filial gesture, and Snape was the most un-paternal figure Harry could imagine. Harry ransacked his brains for a reason, any reason, for the Slytherins to care about Snape's opinion. Did they hold him that highly?

Slowly, sleep caught up with Harry, just as he thought that he had never received any sort of paternal attention himself (well, he supposed his dad had cared, but he didn't remember him...), other than Sirius', with whom he had spent little time, anyway. He wondered how it would feel to have someone that he could instinctively, expectantly, scan for a reassuring reaction.

Harry drifted smoothly into sleep, amid mingled memories of Sirius and of his parents' pictures and of the day's auditions. When Ron arrived, ears red from an argument with Hermione, Harry already dreamt of himself lying on a cradle onstage, surrounded by scattered pictures, and a deep, reassuring voice that came out of nowhere, singing, '*Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation, Darkness stirs, and wakes imagination...*'

First Rehearsals

Chapter 3 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

When they arrived for breakfast, the Great Hall had resumed its usual decoration but a change sat next to the staff table. The hour-glasses that measured each house's points had been brought in from the Entrance Hall, and now there were only two of them. One held scattered rubies and emeralds, for the Gryffindors and the Slytherins, and in the other glowed blue and gold. They slowly filled their seats, gaping at the clocks.

Dumbledore stood. 'I see you have noticed our new system for house points. Good! As you can see, during this term, the points you gain or lose will affect not only your own house, but also the house with whom you're working.'

Ron was crestfallen. 'We're going to work for the Slytherins?'

Across the table from him, Malfoy reacted similarly. 'We lose points when they do? Out of... what, *sympathy*?'

There were several displeased faces. Meanwhile, Hermione had ignored Harry's invitation to their bench and had sat with Blaise in a Slytherin group that included Malfoy; the two tried to think up ways to improve their partnership beyond the performance, so as to make the most of the new system.

Ron was sulking. To divert his attention from them, Harry asked, 'How did it go last night?'

Ron turned to him, aghast. 'As soon as we left the dungeons, she started whacking me for having no tact, for intruding in her private life, and acting like a baby and whatnot. I don't understand! She called me What did I do?!'

'You went to the dungeons with her even though she'd told you to stay?' Harry said tentatively.

'But I just went with her so she wouldn't be alone with them! Who knows what they'd do?'

'Neville went down there the other day and nothing happened...'

'Yeah, but Neville is, well, Neville, and Hermione'

'... is Hermione, yeah. I've met them.' Harry grinned widely. He had woken up in an excellent mood. A dreamless night was a welcome change from the nightmares that usually plagued him. Tonight, at least, there had been no graveyards, no silent rooms... no dead people. It was a good morning. And Ron was whining about Hermione! Why didn't he just stamp 'Property of Ron Weasley, please return to owner' on her forehead?

Half their year was too tired to pay any attention in DADA now a joint class with the Slytherins, of course and Ron spent half his time glowering at Hermione, who seemed to have put up tent with the Slytherins. Out of respect for Blaise, Harry imagined, there were no scathing remarks about the purity of her blood. Pansy still threw her the odd glare, but even she had quieted down. Could be worse Malfoy's glare was permanently on her.

That evening, the Great Hall had once more become a rehearsal room, and they were alone, as the Bohemians didn't rehearse at night. They were almost done when McGonagall and Snape arrived. Thankfully, the supporting roles had been easier to cast. So far, they had cast Harry as *Monsieur Firmin*, and Seamus as *Monsieur André*, the Opera's directors. Harry had hissed to Hermione that he already was the understudy for the lead, and that he couldn't be in two places at the same time, and how was he expected to do it, and--

'Harry.' Hermione seized her chance when he drew breath. 'You're just the understudy. It's highly unlikely that you'll have to take Professor Snape's place. And it'd be a

shame to waste your talent, you did so well in your audition...'

'And because of that, I'm saddled with two parts, is it?'

'Firmin is such a small part when compared to the leads...'

'Why, then, it's a great thing that I don't have to understudy any of the leads, isn't it?!'

'... and he's not a complex character at all. Besides, you won't have to... pour your heart into the Phantom or anything, all you have to do is learn the lines!'

Harry snorted loudly. Hermione scowled. 'It would be a lot worse if you actually had to play him. Or work with Malfoy. Look, just... just wait for Snape and run your lines with him, okay?' She turned her back on his glare and focused on the stage.

Neville, who was a natural talent, but was a bit too nervous, was cast as one of the members of the company, Ubaldo Piangi, who seemed to live for Carlotta. That meant that a lot of time with Pansy was in store for him. Pansy was ecstatic with the chance to mistreat the life out of him.

'And I have to put on an Italian accent, too,' he moaned, looking grimly at his script. He was just stepping offstage when the teachers entered. The Slytherins beckoned for Snape to join them; meanwhile, McGonagall received the latest updates from Hermione and Blaise, their new director.

Everybody else was cast very quickly. McGonagall agreed to play Madame Giry, Meg's mother and the ballet mistress. Hermione almost had a fit. 'Ballet! We need ballerinas! How are we going to get them?!' she looked around in a panic, as though expecting to see a group of girls in tutus breeze in *en pointe*.

Nott, a remarkably quiet Slytherin, who didn't seem keen on talking to Hermione, turned to Blaise. They talked quietly for a moment, and then Blaise addressed their Heads of house, 'Could we possibly ask a few first and second years to join us?'

'Why, I don't know, Mr Zabini.' McGonagall sounded displeased. 'You would need the headmaster's approval, and it would be very unfair to impose yet another project on the younger students solely for the sake of your sense of aesthetics.'

'We understand, Professor,' Blaise retorted. 'But we really can't do without extras. Could we possibly procure them?'

She cocked an eyebrow at the formal request. 'Well, can't you use a few multiplying spells? Theatre is illusion, you could work with that notion.'

'We will, of course, do that for the chorus, but the Masquerade Ball, the performance of *Il Muto*, the ballet, will require real people. Without enough people onstage, the strongest scenes will lose their impact...'

Hermione's mouth was half-open for a tirade in support of Blaise when Snape spoke loudly, 'How many people?'

'The more the better, Professor, but around twenty...?' Hermione pleaded. Blaise nodded.

Snape turned to McGonagall. 'The first and second years are crowded. Taking ten people from each group every now and then will make no difference.' He raised his voice to address the room at large. 'Don't overwork them. They are not at your beck and call.'

'They will not be allowed to attend the nightly rehearsals. And they must only be called in when strictly necessary,' McGonagall added sternly.

'Of course, Professor. I imagine we'll only need them about a month before the performance. They'll be done with their own projects by December. This will be a hobby rather than an imposition.' Blaise smiled politely. Hermione beamed at him.

'Don't get too excited. We still need the headmaster's approval,' McGonagall reminded them.

'... because he would skip a chance to bend the rules?' Snape muttered under his breath, picking up a stray script and sitting alone.

'Very well, children, if this is quite sorted out...'

'There are other concerns.' Blaise cut her off. 'Any ideas on who'll be responsible for the special effects, clothes, etc., etc., etc.?'

'My brothers can get us the special effects,' said Ron, eager to have some of Hermione's attention. 'They're running a shop in Diagon Alley, and their material is pretty good.'

'The famous "Weasley Wheezes", eh?' Blaise smirked. 'Can we trust them not to blow us up mid-song?'

Ron's glare was so ferocious that the very air got warmer. 'They don't risk their clients' health. Contrary to what you might be used to, they actually care about the important stuff.'

Blaise raised an appeasing hand. 'I meant no offence. I was just wondering if they have any normal, workable spells...'

'Of course they do!' said Ron, ears glowing red.

'Good. So, if the headmaster approves of them,' Blaise glanced at the teachers, 'will you ask them to cooperate with us?'

'Sure,' Ron growled. Hermione looked from one to the other.

'Thanks, Ron.' She smiled weakly.

Meanwhile, Blaise scribbled on a clipboard. 'Right... volunteers for clothing and make-up?'

Lavender and Parvati gestured towards themselves. 'You don't need any help?' Blaise asked.

Pansy snorted. 'I don't think I want to wear anything those two cook up.'

Hermione glared at her. 'If you don't like it, you can sew your own; it'll do you some good.'

'I'm sorry for having notions of style, Mudblood,' Pansy hissed, after making sure that none of the teachers was listening. Malfoy turned towards them.

'With a bit of luck, the needle might accidentally burst your swollen head,' Ginny piped in, also glaring, 'and send you backwards into a Vanishing cupboard, ridding us of you.'

'If I was as incapable in... uh... everything... as you are, maybe, you blood-traitor little pile of'

'If she's not happy, she can sew her own clothes, Granger said. May I suggest she sews up her own mouth as well?' Malfoy interrupted.

Pansy looked shocked. 'Draco!'

'This is bad enough without your inane babbling. I say she sews everyone's clothes instead of delaying us further.'

Hermione smirked. 'I'm loathe to say it, but Malfoy's had a good idea. Pansy handles the clothes, and we'll be free to work, at last.'

Pansy swiftly quieted down; Parvati and Lavender, beaming, got the job.

'Are you done?' McGonagall approached. Malfoy was already staring at his script in boredom.

Blaise looked at the clipboard with Hermione peering over his arm. 'There's a minor glitch or two, but nothing we can't sort out as we go.'

'Shall we begin, then?' she asked pointedly.

They regrouped, looking at their texts properly for the first time.

'Harry, after you're done with Seamus, will you have a word with Professor Snape? You know... developing the character...?' Harry glared at Hermione. He had been looking forward to working with Seamus. He knew they could make the directors memorable. Was it really so important that he talked to Snape about a character he wasn't going to play?

'I believe, Miss Granger, that Mr Potter is much too concerned with his own comfort to worry about the character.'

Harry glared at the source of the voice. Snape, who hadn't moved from his seat, had balanced the script on his knee and was writing down on it, his eyes downcast.

'Bloody fantastic...' Harry grumbled.

'I surmise he doesn't want to be alone with the big bad teacher...' Snape droned on.

Hermione looked alarmed. 'Harry, whatever you're thinking, don't.'

'It's almost over for the night. Do you mind if we rehearse properly tomorrow?' Harry addressed Seamus, who nodded, glancing sideways at Hermione.

Harry stalked over to Snape, script in hand, dragging a chair along as noisily as possible. He dropped it with a loud *bang* right next to the professor who didn't even blink and sank down on it, sulking heavily, his bottom almost sliding off the edge, his back hunched, his arms crossed.

'You do realise that I can deduct points from Gryffindor for your disrespect and lack of decorum.'

Harry glared at him. 'You'll have to deduct points from Slytherin as well. *Sir*. And you won't do that.'

Snape raised an eyebrow, still looking at his own handwriting. 'Won't I?'

Harry straightened up, sulking more heavily still.

'That wasn't bad as a first attempt at independent thought,' Snape said smugly from behind his script. Harry was visited by a desire to make him swallow the script. This was going to be a long hour.

Harry looked at Ginny and McGonagall, chatting happily away. Hermione had finally turned from them and approached Malfoy, who looked every bit as receptive as Snape. Neville and Pansy were trying to let out a sentence that didn't sound offensive to either. Snape peered at Harry from above the script.

'Well, Potter? Are you going to put yourself to use?'

A day had passed, and Harry still grumbled over dinner, just as Dumbledore allowed them to recruit younger housemates and to enlist the twins' help ('I shall recommend them to the... Bohemians, is it...? I hear they will be in great need of fireworks.').

'The hypocritical twerp went on and on about how unprofessional I am, but did he even try to work? No!' Harry vented to Ron.

'And you looked so welcoming, too, I'm sure.' Ron smirked around a mouthful of chocolate cake.

Harry tossed bits of his own cake at him. 'Should I have danced of joy?! It's *Snape*. And he even mentioned resuming those... extra lessons,' he added quietly.

'Well, that's good, isn't it? Maybe this time they'll work,' Hermione retorted in the same tone.

'Speaking of that...' Ron started.

'Actually, let's not,' Harry cut him off, well aware of what Ron wanted to discuss. The memory hurt. The summer holidays had washed away the shock, leaving the pain behind... and he didn't want to deal with it. Didn't want to feel it, couldn't feel it. Not yet. 'I was just thinking about how much time I'll have to spend with Snape. Classes, Occlumency, rehearsals... why don't I just move to the dungeons?'

'Shut up, Dumbledore might like the idea,' Ron joked as dinner ended and half the crowd left for the common rooms.

'Harry...' Hermione began.

'Snape. Go to Snape. I know.'

'You're a bit obsessed with him, aren't you? I was going to suggest that you worked with Seamus for a bit. Maybe if you get something done, you'll feel more motivated to--'

'Don't you have to work with him, too? Why don't you just tell him to behave as an adult?' he snapped.

She ignored his outburst completely. 'We'll only be working together later on. He needs to keep to himself for now. The Phantom is a very lonely man...'

'How surprising.'

'... and besides, I need to go through Christine's scenes with Raoul.'

'How's Malfoy behaving, by the way?' Ron asked. He had landed two smaller parts and wasn't sure about which rehearsal group he should join. He hadn't yet stopped complaining about his boatload of work, which was, of course, his way of letting them know that he would never admit to be having fun.

'Terribly.' Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Mrs Norris cares more about this than he does. We've only managed to skim a few sequences, so far. But if he makes me waste another night...' she said somberly.

'We can make him...' Ron began.

Hermione smiled tenderly at him. 'I don't think beating Raoul to a pulp is quite the approach we are looking for. Thanks, though,' she added over her shoulder, already on her way to McGonagall, next to whom Malfoy wouldn't dare put a toe out of line.

'Harry, you're not supposed to be smiling, come on!'

Harry forced himself to look neutral. He and Seamus were rehearsing the first *Notes* sequence, and their characters were quite upset, but Harry couldn't stop laughing at Seamus' heavily accented, over-the-top André. He cleared his throat and sing-sang the end of Firmin's first rant, '... *It's a scandal that'll pack them in the aisles!*

Seamus whirled petulantly, robes flapping, arms waving frantically above his head, and roared, *Damnable! Will they all walk out? This is damna-Harry!*

Harry was stifling chuckles behind his hand. He looked up with a sigh. *André, please don't shout... It's publicity! And the take is vast! Free publicity!*

'But we have no cast...'

Harry grinned. 'You know, that really could become a problem!'

'Harry!'

Harry burst out laughing.

'Harry!' Seamus smiled in spite of himself. He hadn't seen Harry laugh in months.

'Sorry! But you look like you're swatting flies...!'

Seamus scowled. 'This is generally known as an elegantly offended posture.'

Harry snorted. From his seat, Snape observed Harry's laughter with an unusual amount of interest.

Hermione had retreated to a quiet corner with Blaise, having somehow bullied Malfoy into doing some actual work with Ginny. It was a very small scene, but anything to get that cretin moving. At least, he didn't look so apathetic now that she was gone. The reality of working with Hermione had seemingly only begun to sink in.

'He lives across the lake, Monsieur. This is as far as I dare go, McGonagall informed him.

'Madame Giry, thank you,' he answered solemnly, turning to Ginny, who was watching them. 'And now he goes down there to save the girl on his own?'

Ginny nodded. 'There's the confrontation and a long sequence with the Phantom. And there'll be a rope around your neck. The price of heroism,' she added brightly. Draco murmured something unbecoming.

'I'm sure you'd like him better if he were an egotistical sneak like yourself. Tough,' she snapped.

'At least he wouldn't be entering a murderer's lair alone and unarmed.'

McGonagall harrumphed. 'If you're quite done, Mr Malfoy, perhaps it's time you and Miss Granger finally shared some space?'

Hermione's head shot up and she stood, Ron's glare and Malfoy's scorching her as one.

'Yeah, there's only you left,' Dean shouted, over Pansy's ringing voice. She was strolling around, snapping, *Andiamo, Ubaldo, andiamo!* at poor Neville, who stooped to follow her obediently. Hermione dodged the wand she was using to poke Neville and dragged herself over to Harry's group, gazing at Blaise melancholically.

'Seamus!' Dean called. 'You free? Come over here! Ron, why are you still standing there?!' Seamus and Ron gestured in mock servitude and joined him in a set of miscellaneous scenes with a group of Slytherins. McGonagall and Ginny moved away, discussing their own characters, and Harry found himself alone.

'Potter. Come here.'

Harry turned around. No, not alone. He had a personal poltergeist.

'The--there?'

'Yes. Where I am. As opposed to where you are. Come here.'

Harry stared without an ounce of desire to obey him. Last night was still a vivid memory.

'Potter, do you need instructions on how to walk?'

'Why do you need me there? *Sir?*'

'Because distance is an obstacle when one needs to work with another. Or do you intend to laze about while everybody else works?' Snape raised an eyebrow. 'How predictable.'

Harry walked so fast that he almost collided with his teacher. 'Which scene are we working on?'

'None where you're allowed to employ that tone.'

Harry directed his glare at the windows.

'Have you even read the script?'

'Mostly,' Harry grumbled.

'Mostly?' Snape scorned.

'You told us our Potions homework took precedence over everything else, sir.' Three different essays on as many potion ingredients were due for their next class. Harry hadn't even started on his yet, but he wasn't about to mention that.

'Your tone, Potter. Open that script on the underground lake sequence. Let's see how you approach the "Morning after".'

'Aren't you supposed to be the one to do it, sir?' said Harry, flipping slowly to scene five.

Snape eyed him coldly. Harry glared back. 'I'm just saying... shouldn't you be doing some work as well? I only see you sulkin-- staring around.'

'That will be twenty points from Gryffindor. And Slytherin.'

Harry looked up and blinked. 'You took points from Slytherin?'

'Good perception, Potter. Apply it to the character.'

Harry was staring at him. 'You took points from Slytherin?'

'Is that a new mantra?'

Harry furrowed his brow. 'Are you feeling all right?'

Snape took a deep breath. 'The lines, if you don't mind?'

Harry focused on his script. A moment later, he looked up again. 'I don't understand.'

'How startling.'

'Well, I can always go back to my--'

'Out with it!'

'It makes no sense! Why does he take her there?'

'Beg your pardon?'

'Why does he take her to his lair, or whatever it is, knowing that she'll be missed?'

'She's having lessons with him. There's nothing in the script saying she doesn't go there routinely.'

'She's acting like it's the first time she sees the place.'

'... are you really a wizard? She's been hypnotised. She's not even sure she's been there this time.'

'But surely he could have found a better place than his very secret home...?'

Snape's eyes rolled. 'Unsurprisingly, you're missing the point. He's an outcast, he's incredibly lonely and he loves her. Taking her to the one place where he could both be safe and exercise his genius was very probably his only way of bringing her into his world, of impressing her.'

'She doesn't want to be a part of his world, though,' Harry completed slowly.

'But he was *in love*, wasn't he?' Snape's voice clipped the words as though they burned him. 'He had to try. Furthermore, her beau had just fetched the horses for a night out, and he might have felt that she was straying.'

'I get it, now. She's his property.'

Snape's eyes rolled. 'I demand a new understudy. You're doing this on purpose. One can't naturally be so dense.'

'What?!'

'It's love, Potter. Obsessive love. Jealousy. Insecurity. Not possession. Twit.'

'He hypnotised her, kidnapped her, blackmailed her, and let her return under the condition that she remained forever his servant. I'm not saying he should have stood back and watched, but you call this love?!'

'He just wanted a chance to show her that he, too, was worthy of her.'

Harry opened his mouth and snapped it shut again. 'Okay,' he said finally. 'He's beyond deluded,' he added between his teeth.

'But she did have feelings for him.'

Harry snorted. 'It took her childhood sweetheart five minutes to make her forget them.'

'And it took him five *seconds* to remind her of them, Potter. Is this how you intend to portray his tragic situation?'

Harry looked up. 'Who, me? You've obviously got a better grasp on the character than I do. I'll just be in the background, being extorted by your tragic hero.'

Snape appeared to be on the verge of hitting him. 'Very well. Let's keep this simple for you. Everything about him is deeply connected to music. He has a fascination with Christine, both because he wants her for himself and because he sees an immeasurable talent in her. Raoul's presence takes her focus away both from him and their music. We can never be sure if his driving force is Christine or his music. Keep that in mind and you might be passable.'

Harry shrugged. 'You're the one who's playing him.'

'Who knows?'

A glower slowly sank into Harry's eyes. 'Don't you dare weasel out of this.'

'Tone, Potter.'

'Don't you dare weasel out of this, *sir*. I... already have a part. I don't even have an understudy and you've made a commitment to Dumbledore!'

'I've made a great deal of commitments to Dumbledore. Both him and you would do well to remember that they do sometimes overlap.' On that note, Snape buried his nose in his script, leaving Harry alone to deal with the dawning comprehension.

'For Merlin's sake! It's not possible!' Harry looked up to see what was infuriating McGonagall. Hermione and Malfoy, keeping a respectable distance from one another, looked mutinous.

'I think Fudge dating You-Know-Who is more likely than this,' Dean commented, to fervent nods everywhere.

'Miss Granger, Mr Malfoy, are you quite serious about this project? Because if this is an accurate sample of what you intend to do before the other houses, you may feel free to formally quit!'

Harry eyed Ron questioningly. Ron approached, shrugging as though it was nothing new. 'Can't say I blame her,' he said simply. Snape cocked an eyebrow without raising his eyes. Ron lowered his voice. 'Malfoy actually sounds a bit psycho, spouting all that poetry.'

Sighing heavily, Hermione took a hesitant step towards Malfoy. He glided a few inches forward. Shortly later, they were within an acceptable foot of each other.

'Don't glare,' Ginny advised quietly, watching them from beside Dumbledore. They put on somewhat neutral expressions and suddenly resembled marble statues. Everybody else was now visibly fidgety. Even Pansy's rants to Neville were now intertwined with exasperated looks at the disruptive pair in the centre of the room.

Snape's acid voice dragging across the room made half of them jump out of their skin. 'Mr Malfoy, Miss Granger, I am going to count to five and you will raise your arms, embrace and look passionate.'

Hermione looked incredulous, but Malfoy didn't seem interested in challenging his Head of house. In the blink of an eye, his arms were around her waist and their faces were so close that she had to bend slightly backwards in order to see him properly. She gingerly placed her hands on his forearms, matching his nauseated expression perfectly.

'If you make me reach "six", I will personally go there and lock you together. Is that clear?'

Malfoy held Hermione with a little more conviction. She narrowed her eyes. Snape, whose definition of "passionate" seemed to differ slightly from the group's, retreated to his seat, and the rehearsal finally continued.

Later on, having given Ron a very vivid description of what she would do to him if he dogged her again, Hermione again went downstairs with Blaise, but Malfoy didn't go up the Gryffindor tower.

Already in bed, Harry was still so bewildered that he had had a semi-civil conversation with Snape that he barely heard Ron's rant.

'Ron?'

'Hmm?' Ron said sleepily.

'I think Snape's ill.'

'Hope so.' Ron rolled over and fell asleep.

Hogsmeade

Chapter 4 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

At the crack of dawn, news came that their first Hogsmeade weekend would take place two weeks from then. The third years' loud rejoicing was contagious. Shortly afterwards, excitement was rampant in the Gryffindor common room. The Quidditch team spread their good mood around as they left for practice. Ginny, who had trailed behind to talk to boyfriend Dean, waved faintly to Hermione and ran after her mates.

'Why couldn't it be in October instead?' Hermione groaned as soon as they were out of earshot. 'Isn't our schedule tight enough as it is?'

Seamus poked her side playfully. 'Yeah, Hermione, one holiday with three months of hard work ahead of us. How will we ever make up for it?'

'But it's a whole day completely wasted! No rehearsals, no practice and no schoolwork... I just know the rehearsals will be rescheduled to make time for the rest, I just *know* it...!'

And of course, when the very windswept players arrived for lunch, they were told that there would be no rehearsals in the week prior to the celebrated weekend.

'But the rehearsals!'

'... can wait, Hermione,' Ron said seriously. 'We're only performing by Christmas ti--'

'You think that's a lot of time...?'

'...and Quidditch season is beginning. Give us a break,' he finished sourly. 'You're only mad because of Zabini, anyway,' he added between his teeth.

She went red with indignation. Harry thought it was just the moment to intrude. 'Don't mind his bad mood. We had to put up with the Slytherins all morning.'

Parvati looked surprised. 'They were there? Don't they get tired of jeering? We always beat them, anyway...'

'Yes, I thought they'd behave now with the joint houses. If we lose points, so do they...' Hermione commented, slightly let down.

'That's the thing,' Harry clarified with an airiness that he was far from feeling. 'Guess who our new Quidditch allies are.'

Ron snorted. Hermione looked incredulous. 'No...!'

'To save us the time, the trouble, and a useless match, Madam Hooch says, we're not playing against the house affiliated with us. I think we're expected to support them too.'

'Fat chance.'

'Why were they there, then?' Hermione wondered aloud.

'Well, their practice was earlier than ours, and Madam Hooch wanted us to hear the news together.' Harry let out a snort rather similar to Ron's. 'And then I suppose some of them decided to stay and, er, be supportive. Good fun, really. I wish you'd been there.'

'Oh, Harry wasn't the only one,' Ron complained.

Harry snapped his fingers. 'Right. Blaise was there, and he says he needs to talk to you, Hermione.'

'Didn't say why, though,' Ron added, looking as though he wanted to read the answer on her face.

'And speaking of the devil...' Blaise was making his way through the throng of Gryffindors, nodding in acknowledgement to a few of them.

'I'm sorry to interrupt.' He sighed upon reaching them, not sounding at all sorry. 'But I need a word with you, Hermione. I really won't take much of your time.'

The seriousness of his face seemed to alarm Hermione, who sat up immediately. Ron mimicked Blaise's formal manners behind their back as they talked just a few feet away. As soon as they resumed their seats, he rounded on Hermione. 'Well?'

Hermione picked up a bowl of grapes. 'We want to work as a duo in other subjects, and we have to make proper plans for that, Ron, that's all. Can't believe all the objections the teachers are raising.'

'And he couldn't tell you that in front of us why?'

Hermione paused mid-grape to look at him. 'Because it's individual work and we're not supposed to comment on it in front of others?'

'Basically, you don't trust us?' Ron cut her off, red in the ears.

'Yeah, Hermione, we would never copy off you!' Harry mocked.

'What side are you on?'

Harry looked left and right. 'Parvati's.'

Hermione just smiled, biting down on another grape.

Ron picked up his script grumpily. 'This is easier than potion formulas and transfiguration models, at least. Are you done with yours, Harry?'

Harry nodded absently, picking up the timetable that a solitary owl had just dropped on his lap. His Occlumency lessons would be resumed during the rehearsal-free week. 'Sure.' He sighed in resignation. 'A whole week without him would be just too much to ask.'

'What was that?'

'Nothing.' Harry dropped his fork depressively.

The week went smoothly, as they were now used to the longer daily routine and the shorter nights. Every now and then, Hermione would let them know that Malfoy was still foul whenever out of the teachers' earshot, but he was at least beginning to do some proper work, even deigning to discuss their scenes together. Everything had to be done his way, of course; otherwise, there would be a long, detailed rant about how they were undeserving, unprofessional and undevoted to the show.

Pansy and Neville had ultimately decided to ignore each other completely. 'She's actually quite good,' he would tell them at breakfast. 'When she's not obsessing over Malfoy. She's a psycho, I tell you. No wonder he keeps his distance. Just three more months, just three more.'

Harry had mixed feelings. He still thought a performance was an incredibly daft idea, under the circumstances, but being Firmin to Seamus' André was loads of fun obviously, they got very little work done. Working with Snape was the most unpleasant part of the whole process, but they had somehow managed to have more civil exchanges, and he had lost surprisingly few points.

'You only lost us fifty-five points this week, Harry. Good work!' Dean shouted one evening over dinner. There were glowers from the Slytherins. Their collective notion of a large amount obviously differed from the Gryffindors'.

'Harry usually loses us fifty points in one day, if Professor Snape is in a good mood,' Dean clarified dismissively, proceeding to reminisce over Harry's most outrageous point losses.

After another gruelling weekend, their rehearsal-free week arrived. Having been spared the sight of Hermione and Blaise walking together to the dormitories and, consequently, of Malfoy walking to their tower every other day, Ron positively glowed. Harry was glad to see him quiet down because he, himself, had more pressing things in his mind. Two after class Occlumency lessons loomed ahead, one on Wednesday and another on Friday. Snape had also mentioned a third on Saturday morning, which would lose him half the trip to Hogsmeade.

'Why bother going at all?' he moaned in the common room.

'Come on, mate, nothing ever happens in the morning, anyway,' Ron said tentatively. 'If you run, we can have lunch together and enjoy the afternoon!' he added brightly. Hermione nodded reluctantly. 'He won't even want you there on Saturday,' Ron continued. 'This is Snape. He won't want to spend all of his time with you.'

Harry did a double take. 'That sounded incredibly bad.'

Ron stood still for a moment, then shuddered. 'Eugh. I didn't mean it like that. Shut up.'

Hermione glared sharply at him. 'What? He's a Slytherin, so he's undeserving of happiness?'

Ron looked surprised. 'Hermione, we're talking about Snape. Have you met him?'

'And you're a divine gift?'

'Are you comparing me to him?!'

'It wouldn't be fair. He'd win by a mile!' Hermione snapped.

'Just because he's a Slytherin?!'

'Because he's not you!' Ron's ears were purple now. Hermione was fuming.

Harry, who had very little interest in Snape's private life, had tuned out already. In fact, the strong chance that most of their teachers had families and a life outside the school rarely crossed his mind. But Snape... in his mind's eye, Snape was always alone. Harry simply couldn't picture him with anybody. The few scenes of his childhood and adolescence that Harry had broken into just cemented the thought. With an uncomfortable jolt, Harry recalled his dad's and Sirius' responsibility in that state of affairs.

It's not like he was a goody-goody, either, Harry told himself, burying his misplaced sympathy under a respectable amount of resentment and resuming his silent theories. Snape married. Snape surrounded by a family. Snape, a father. What a terrifying thought.

Ron was right. Snape's leisure time had to consist of sulking, brooding and more sulking. The image of himself doing just that in Privet Drive assaulted him so violently that the pain was almost physical.

I'm not him. I don't drive people to their death, he told himself. A little voice in his mind keened about Cedric. *Sirius would still be alive if it weren't for him,* he silently repeated.

'Is Snape actually worth an argument?' he addressed the others in a light tone. They turned their reddened faces to him, then to each other, and fell silent.

That night, when they parted, Ron was still grumbling that rooms should be prepared in Azkaban to receive the yet-unborn generations of Slytherins.

'Then Azkaban will have a fine choir!' Hermione quipped over her shoulder, retreating before Ron had time to answer. Harry could hear her singing through the open door to the girls' dormitories going, *'Darkness stirs, and wakes imagination...'*

That song plagued his sleep. It came through the darkness in that ethereal whisper, but there was a definitely corporeal figure approaching him, tonight, and he was no longer a baby. The cradle was a bed, the floor beneath it was an underground lake and Sirius was playing Quidditch high above him.

Harry would have felt badly about having dreamt of Snape, if the reality didn't make him feel so much worse. In spite of his improvements, his Occlumency lessons were hard as ever. And on Wednesday, Snape had brought forth that memory that night in the Ministry. His concentration had been dusted and Harry had collapsed, bumping on the edge of the desk. Clearly relishing his reaction, Snape chased that memory out again and again, and Harry collapsed over and over, closing his mind a little bit more every time, refusing to give in to Snape's desire to see him at his most vulnerable. He didn't dream of Snape after their lesson.

On Friday, having organised his thoughts so that they all sat firmly on top of that one memory, Harry found himself flushing redder than Ron's hair when Snape nosedived into the memory of his latest dreams. Bigger embarrassment could not exist than feeling Snape pore over a dream he didn't even remember, Harry had thought. And Snape had proved him wrong, taking advantage of Harry's shock to have a detailed look at his own prominent participation in Harry's most recent dream.

Harry braced himself for a memorable lambasting, but Snape just told him stiffly to clear his mind before sleep ('Which has clearly been too much of a bother for you.') and warning that he would be expecting him early next morning.

Harry took a deep breath. 'Professor, it's a Hogsmeade weekend... Couldn't we--'

'No, Potter, we can't. Had you done this properly last year, you would be free for Hogsmeade now, but as it is, you will have to make the sacrifice, as will I.' And that was it.

Later, in bed, Harry dreamt of a gagged Potions master. The details were fuzzy, but there seemed to be chains lurking in the recesses of whichever place that was. He woke up in a very good mood, which lasted for about two seconds, until he looked down and had to dash for the bath, hoping for very, very cold water.

Having reassured Harry that nothing important would happen before he arrived, and that nothing would ever be important without him there to witness it, Hermione, Neville, Seamus and Ron who eyed Ginny and Dean warily made their chatty way to Hogsmeade. Only Hermione was quiet. They were nearing Zonko's when she spoke for the first time, mentioning a previous engagement and promising to meet them at the Three Broomsticks for lunch.

'But...' Seamus complained.

'Don't be mad. I don't even really like Zonko's, I'd only spoil your fun. See you later!' She spun on her heel and ran to a peculiarly decorated shop that they had never entered.

'What's got into her?' Ron complained. Ginny rolled her eyes.

'It hasn't yet, but it hopefully will. She's got a date, obviously.'

Seamus had a coughing fit. Dean stared at Ginny.

'And you, how many hints do you need? Take my hand!' she urged him. Seamus snorted and poked Dean playfully.

Ron wasn't even listening. 'What date? With whom?'

Ginny cocked her eyebrow at him. 'With whom do you think it is?'

Comprehension dawned. Ron turned purple. 'I'm going to kill him! I'm go--'

'... shut up and let Hermione do what's best for her.'

'He's not it!'

'And you know that how?'

'He- he- he's a friend of Malfoy's, and he's going to hurt her! He's doing it already, he's changing her! She's changed!'

'It was about time. And why don't you ask her out and be done with it, instead of having a fit because someone got there first?'

Ron didn't speak to Ginny all morning. He scoured every street in the little village for signs of Hermione, but she seemed to have vanished in thin air. After raiding Zonko's, the group made their way to the Three Broomsticks, dragging Ron along and commenting that the twins might like to see some of the newly arrived items. The pub was quite full. Harry half expected to see students dangling from the old chandelier.

'Vacant table over there!' Seamus shouted, motioning towards the window. At the table beside it, shadowed by the contrast between window and dark wall, were Blaise and Hermione, waving at them and pointing at the empty table. Ron, sulking heavily, followed the group, sitting as far away from the pair as he could. Neville sat next to Blaise, distancing himself somewhat to give the pair a measure of privacy. Ginny sat next to Ron.

'There's no need to be so rude. He was just trying to be polite.'

'He doesn't look too hurt,' Ron spat. Indeed, Blaise and Hermione had resumed their conversation, heads very close, and Blaise had just leaned in to tell her a secret.

'Ridiculous,' Ron grunted. 'He could be using a Sonorus Charm, and no-one would hear him with this din. And her hair won't stay behind her ear no matter how many times he puts it there, so that's gratuitous, too.'

'So, they've just had a massive order from a German group. They're really impressed with the...' Everyone but Ron was listening to Ginny's news on the twins' latest exploits.

'Does he think it's cool to look like you haven't seen a comb in years?' Ron grumbled. Harry, who had just arrived, scowled at him, only then realising that Ron's eyes were

still trained on Hermione, who had run a hand over Blaise's hair and was laughing uncharacteristically loudly at something he had just said. 'And this is the first date. Wonder what'll come next.'

The fates seemed to favour Ron's curiosity. Blaise and Hermione sat up and gestured abundantly to signal that they were leaving. Hermione made a detour to the toilet, and Blaise waited with them, placing a few Galleons on the table to pay for the group's lunch. They protested, but he raised his hand dismissively.

'It's too noisy here to have a proper argument over the cheque. Today, I'm paying. Please in good camaraderie.'

Ginny tried another feeble protest.

'Next time it's on you, then,' he suggested. 'Hoping there is one,' he added more warmly.

'I don't need you to pay for my lunch,' Ron said dignifiedly.

'Of course you don't.' Blaise seemed startled. 'But I'm not going to pay for everyone else's lunch and not yours, am I? That would make it sound like I have a personal issue against you.'

Ron couldn't tell him exactly where to shove their issues because Blaise was already turning his back on the table. 'Now, let's see if I can drag Hermione out of that loo and get away from this chaos.'

A minute later, they were all chatting away again, and Ron had finally begun to relax. Hermione chose that precise moment to come out of the ladies' room. Blaise immediately offered her his arm, which she seemed to find so charming that she took a deep breath, heaved herself on her tiptoes and kissed him full on the mouth. Blaise, looking genuinely surprised, didn't push her away, and thus, they retreated somewhat awkwardly, unnoticed by everyone but Ron and a pale young man sitting across the room, who had lowered his glass with a nauseated expression as the scene unfolded.

Ron stared glumly at the two tangled shadows outside the door. Harry, who missed the scene because he had gone up to Madam Rosmerta for a butterbeer that he wanted to pay for himself, sat beside him. 'Where's Hermione?'

'Out,' Ron grunted.

'With Blaise,' Ginny added, sparing her brother a pitying look.

'Blai-- oh, the boyfriend.'

'You knew?' Ron asked in a hurt voice.

Harry looked at him blankly. 'No, I... They didn't exactly tell me, but... well, it's pretty obvious now, isn't it?'

Ron glared silently at the wall. After a few minutes of relentless fuming, he turned to Harry. 'So, how did it go with Snape?'

They were both quiet from then on.

While the merry crew left for Hogsmeade, Harry had dragged himself depressively to the dungeons. Snape, of course, was waiting.

Harry earnestly tried to wipe his very brain cells from his mind, but exactly then, he caught sight of a metallic glint on the wall that reminded him of a shackle. Last night's dream slipped into his mind and his hold on his wand wavered. And of course, Snape chose that precise moment to attack.

Harry thought that the look Snape gave him could make the Whomping Willow spontaneously combust. He wondered what had happened to the good old visions of Lord Voldemort's whereabouts.

'Do I want to see the rest of that sequence, Potter?' It seemed unwise to defy the edge in Snape's voice.

'There's nothing else.'

'Hmm,' Snape sounded doubtful. 'Have you had any visions of the Dark Lord recently?'

Harry blinked at the change in subject. 'No, sir.'

'Nothing strange?'

'No, sir.'

'Your mind seems remarkably empty this week, Potter, even for you. Have you been doing nothing at all?'

'Been busy with school and stuff.'

'School's never prevented you from engaging in... stuff.'

Harry chewed on the reply he was itching to give.

'Why would it now?' Snape went on acidly.

'Like I said, I've been too busy to do anything out of the schedule, sir,' Harry hoped that his glower could express the unprintable words in his mind.

'Are you *trying* to be too busy?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

Snape sat on the edge of the desk, looking him in the eye. 'I mean that you seem to be going out of your way to avoid quiet thought. Reflection.'

Harry did not like the path this was taking. 'What would I be avoiding?'

Snape looked at him sharply. 'Why don't you tell me?'

'I have nothing to say.'

'Nothing about last term's events?'

Harry froze. 'No.'

'Have you talked about them with anyone?'

'No.' Harry bit out.

'Why?'

'With all due respect... sir... I don't owe you any explanations.'

'As your teacher, I am fully entitled to demanding explanations should I feel your personal life is affecting your schoolwork. And you owe me answers.'

'My performance is fine. Am I dismissed?'

Snape ignored his question. 'You really should talk about it. With a teacher, if there's no-one else.'

Utterly unsettled by Snape's seriousness, Harry blurted out, 'If I had anything to say, I wouldn't want you to listen.'

Snape sneered. 'Obviously. Thankfully.'

There was a tense silence. Harry looked at Snape questioningly. 'Why do you want me to think about it?'

'Some things shouldn't be bottled inside.'

That sent the words leaping out of Harry's mouth. 'And why would you care?! Why do you want me to relive that? Are you just going to jab until it bleeds? I won't bleed for your entertainment,' Harry gritted out. 'I don't need a parody of concern from the man who danced on his grave. Are you sorry that you didn't do it yourself? Well, here's good news for you. He only left the house because you drove him to it. So perhaps I shouldn't be here, pretending to be civil to the man who killed him!'

It was amazing that Gryffindor wasn't in negative points yet. Snape's gaze never wavered throughout Harry's outburst, and when he spoke, it was in a hollow voice, 'Dismissed, Potter.'

Still catching his breath, Harry blinked at him. 'Next Wednesday, same hour. Be here or I'll drag you down. And thirty points from Gryffindor, for insolence and denial. You may go.'

Harry stomped out of Snape's office in such blind fury that he didn't notice that Snape had taken no points for 'calumny', although Harry had essentially called him a murderer. He didn't feel the weight of the concerned gaze following him through the corridor. The only thing in Harry's mind, as Hogsmeade got closer and closer, was that Snape was the most loathsome creature alive.

Damsel in Distress

Chapter 5 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Hermione only rejoined them in Hogwarts, announcing that her day had been lovely and asking about theirs. Ron, who had been sitting by the window, stood and left ostensibly for dinner as soon as she and her beaming smile entered the room.

'Where were you? There was no trace of you all day!' Dean asked. Ginny glared at him.

'Blaise wanted to, er, show me his favourite places,' Hermione replied, pink to the ears. 'They're not very visited.'

'I like him,' Ginny said supportively.

'He's great company,' Hermione added dreamily. 'Where's Ron?'

Harry had never seen her less perceptive, but he didn't have the energy to be bothered. The others had left him alone in sympathy with the remedial lesson ordeal, and he had fumed about Snape's sanctimonious attitude all afternoon. And now, the faint shadow of remorse he felt confused him. For months, whenever he could muster the strength to think about that terrible day for a second, he had blamed Snape. He had fantasised about cornering the man to tell him what he thought of him and his outdated grudge. And yet, now that he had voiced some of it, he felt self-conscious. Snape had listened to his rant without flinching, and somehow, it made him feel infantile and unfair.

Harry rested his face on his hands, trying to string two coherent thoughts together. When he looked up again, he was alone with a madly scribbling Hermione.

'I almost forgot my Arithmancy essay,' she said, somewhat apologetically, gripping the parchment tightly and trying to write faster.

'Where's... everybody else?'

'Downstairs for dinner. I'm almost done... do you mind waiting just another moment?'

Harry nodded his assent, focusing on his thoughts again. All right, perhaps he could have saved the accusations for a more appropriate occasion. But they were still true. Snape was a git, he hated Harry and the world at large, and he was probably still celebrating Sirius'...

'Done. Let's go, Harry.'

The Great Hall was packed. They walked up to Ron, who immediately moved to a free spot between Neville and Seamus. A peculiar scene unfolded a few feet away. Malfoy and Ginny were talking in a conspiratorial manner, oblivious to everyone's gazes.

Hermione, looking slightly hurt with Ron, spoke up. 'They're talking, now?'

'In a manner of speaking,' Dean informed her without tearing his eyes from the pair. 'Malfoy came over to announce that they needed to talk and that it was all the same for him if they did it in private or here with us. She went with him.'

'What could they have to say to each other?' Harry wondered.

'I'd like to know,' Dean replied somberly.

'Well, they haven't drawn their wands yet. That's a good sign.'

They approached Ron for a closer look, and this time he didn't stand at Hermione's arrival. He was concentrated on Ginny's serious face and the scattered words that they could hear.

'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

'Today,' Malfoy insisted.

'I need to digest this, Malfoy. Tomorrow... during the rehearsal.'

'But...!'

'Look at me that way again, and it's *never*.'

A few nervous words later, both went back to their places, and everyone looked vacant.

'... are you all okay?'

'What did Malfoy want?' Dean snapped, offering her a place. She sighed.

'To discuss the play. He can be really obsessive, little bugger. Thinks he owns the truth.' She snorted. 'On the other hand, Hermione, I think he's starting to care about his part. Maybe he'll work properly from now on.' She elaborated no further, and they let her be. If Dean had no problem with it, they had best stay out of it.

Harry, however, was preoccupied with his own business, and his gaze wandered to the staff table of its own volition. McGonagall whispered in the ear of a faintly smiley Dumbledore. Snape was obviously displeased with his favourite student, but his warning looks seemed to bounce off Malfoy. Ginny sprinted up to the dormitory as soon as she was allowed.

As they vacated the table, Hermione commented with Harry that she and Snape had begun to work on their scenes together. Harry bid her good luck, paused to cast a filthy glance at the staff table, and went straight to bed.

After a light slumber, in which a dark figure glided indifferently away from him, he tossed and turned for hours, only to drift off restlessly again, listening to the apologetic voice that said, 'I'm expected I can't stay'. It wasn't right, they should be approaching, not sliding apart, Harry thought through the haze, spotting a beckoning figure far ahead. The man followed it, and Harry ran towards them, and it was clearer, now it was Hermione. Harry relaxed. It was just a rehearsal and no-one would be leaving. But as they approached, Hermione's body grew, her face distorted, and her welcoming smile became a lipless leer. When Harry reached her, he saw with horror that she had turned into Voldemort. Harry wanted to warn the man, tell him to run away, but he turned to Harry with a quiet, 'You shouldn't be here,' and it was Snape, it was clearly Snape, despite the mask that was stretching across his face, the Phantom's mask turning into a Death Eater's, it was Snape turning his back on him, his one visible eye apologetic as he went away with a wildly cackling Voldemort, leaving Harry alone in the dark.

When Harry finally woke up, he was freezing, in spite of the warm sunshine crawling over his bed.

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking, so his arrival at the breakfast table with a heavily edited summary of his dreams provided a welcome neutral subject for conversation. And he really needed to talk about this one. He wanted to understand it, and above all, he had to know why it upset him so.

'Are you sure it wasn't a vision, mate?' Ron sounded worried. 'A man being taken by You-Know-Who... sure it wasn't real?'

'It was a dream. They were all dreams,' Harry clarified firmly. 'This one just... felt so premonitory. The man never coming back, ever.'

'Well, if they're just nightmares...?' Hermione began sensibly.

'If they're just nightmares, I shouldn't feel sick waking up, should I?' Harry snapped.

'Harry, it's perfectly natural to be upset waking up from a nightmare, but dwelling on it...?'

'That man in the dream, did he have a face?' Ron suddenly asked.

Harry started. 'No. I couldn't see who it was.'

'Are you worried about someone?'

'No! I mean, yes... the two of you--the usual--'

'I'm flattered.' Hermione grimaced. 'But you really should stop reading too much into nightmares and focus on any actual visions. They are our real problem.' Ron nodded in agreement, glomping his porridge at great speed. They were late.

'You said someone was walking up to me and then I turned into Lord Voldemort?' Hermione asked after a short silence. Harry nodded. She was thoughtful.

'Then the man might have been Professor Snape...' she finally said.

Harry's very blood froze. Ron stared at him. 'You've been dreaming about Snape?!'

'No!'

'I just meant,' Hermione sighed, 'that we had been talking about him before we went to bed last night...'

'You had?!' Ron made a face.

'... thus making it natural that it would carry into your dreams, tense as you are. Ron's right, Harry, don't worry too much about it.'

'Potter, Weasleys, do you need a formal invitation?'

They raised their eyes. Only the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams remained in the Hall, waiting for Harry, Ron and Ginny, who was still engrossed in conversation with Dean, a few feet away from the trio.

'Coming,' Harry grunted, getting to his feet.

'They're right. We shouldn't keep them waiting.' Hermione hurried to reach Blaise, who stepped forth and offered her his arm.

Only Ron noticed that Malfoy hadn't addressed them as 'Potty and Weasels', or worse, as he usually did. He smirked at the arrogant young man leaning against the wall and turned away, missing the ghostly nod his sister directed at Malfoy.

At least they're speaking again, Harry thought on his way out. When they returned, exhausted and sweaty, the furniture had been waltzed away again, and they barely had time to lunch because Hermione and Blaise were already throwing a fit about wasting precious time. Malfoy waited until Hermione went up to Snape and approached Ginny, whisking her away from McGonagall in the blink of an eye. Ron signalled for Harry and Dean. They slipped around the others to get closer to the pair.

'I don't know, Malfoy, I'll have to think about this...'

'What have you been doing so far?'

'I like him.'

'... good for you?'

'If I must choose between him and you...'

'Nobody's asking you to do that.'

'... he wins.'

'How melodramatic.'

'I need to think.'

'How long?'

'... few days.'

'... can't wait that long.'

Ron walked silently away, taking the others along. As they tried to make sense of what they had heard, Ginny rejoined her Head of house and Malfoy approached Pansy. Dean was so serious that Ron felt he had to say something. 'I know it didn't sound good, but--'

'It wasn't just me?'

'To me it just sounded liked Malfoy was being himself and trying to force Ginny into something,' Harry pointed out. 'And as usual, she proved that she can defend herself.'

'Dunno, she looked cooperative enough.'

'You're talking about my sister, mate,' Ron reminded him. 'She wouldn't do anything like that.'

'Of course not,' Dean quickly answered. 'I trust her. But I don't trust him.'

'The other day, Hermione said that Malfoy's been obsessing a bit about this performance. They were probably just trying to adapt their text,' Harry added brightly. He, too, trusted Ginny to at least have the decency of breaking up with Dean before moving on to someone else. But Malfoy seemed too far-fetched an option, even for the most rebellious of the Weasleys.

Seamus shouted for Harry. It was time to work. Hermione walked backwards to the stage, smiling at Blaise, who was trying to wrench Pansy from Malfoy's arm. People were gathering for the opening scene, and Malfoy joined them, barking at Pansy to get off him and glaring at the stage, where Snape and Hermione discussed a scene as discreetly as they could. Neville instinctively offered his hand to the staggering Pansy, but she brushed him off.

'Fine. Have it your way,' he grunted, swearing at her in a voice so soft that only the serpent on the nearby Slytherin banner heard him. It hissed reproachfully.

Onstage, Hermione had sat on the floor, looking up at Snape with a pitying expression, and he loomed over her, looking miserable. She touched his extended hand, pretending to give him something. 'The mask,' Harry thought. 'She's seeing him for the first time.'

Hermione took the hand Snape offered her, he addressed Harry and Seamus, who were still looking for their scripts, as 'those two fools who run my theatre', and hand in hand, they sprinted through the crowd towards the barrier. The Bohemians were remarkably quiet. Harry wondered what they were doing, and if any of them were going through his inner turmoil. The thought of Flitwick singing Cho a song was funny. He recalled that Cho wasn't in the school any more, and somehow, it was even funnier.

Blaise was now giving them instructions for the *// Muto* sequence. 'Most of you are required onstage for this one, and we're not quite ready for that yet. Just to give us a general idea of what we need to do, I suggest you show us your sequences in pairs, in the right order.'

They agreed. It was a rather chaotic scene, and readying for it took them as long as actually doing it. Hermione was now centre stage, calling Raoul. An agitated Malfoy stepped onstage and embraced her, pleading with her to go with him. Ron thought that he should have looked more fierce. Hermione, shivering from head to toe, dragged him in the opposite direction, murmuring something about the roof.

Her acting had greatly improved, Harry thought, observing her pale face and bright eyes. 'She really should put on a stronger voice, though. What did she just say?' he asked himself. But he had no time to elaborate on his criticism because, as she pulled Malfoy to her, for the ending, she swayed ominously and collapsed on him, unconscious.

For a second, they thought she was improvising. Lavender even commented that it would look very nice if Raoul had to carry Christine offstage. But then, Malfoy's knees gave way under the unexpected weight, and he, too, collapsed with Hermione on his lap and her head lurching somberly against his chest. He looked genuinely mortified. Turning to a wide-eyed Ron, Harry barely had time to see it, but there it was, the piercing, accusatory look from Ginny. Harry turned instinctively to Malfoy, who was clearly mouthing, 'I didn't do anything!'

Now everyone had crowded around them, suggesting wet towels, salts, assorted spells to revive Hermione. Blaise had run to her side, but had no heart to pull her out of Malfoy's arms. Her pallor was deathly, her lips and eyelids were ashen. The veins in her hands were blue against the white skin. Even Malfoy had more colour than her.

Harry, Ron and the others elbowed their way after Blaise. Ron, too, was pale, but Ginny was flushed. She approached Malfoy from behind and hissed, 'What have you done to her?'

He nearly dropped Hermione at this, but getting a grip on himself and holding her more securely, he said loudly, 'I did nothing! She fainted on me. Perhaps you should feed her!'

Ron stood menacingly in front of him.

'I didn't do anything,' Malfoy repeated, looking Ginny in the eye. He sounded sincere.

'He's telling the truth,' Seamus said tentatively. 'I was here when it happened. She just fainted.' Harry had to nod his agreement. He, too, had seen nothing.

'I'm not even carrying my wand,' Malfoy sounded irritated now. His chest heaved, making Hermione's head sway somberly.

'This does not seem to have been provoked by a wand,' said a deep voice that made Harry's hair stand on end.

McGonagall looked sternly at Snape. 'We can theorise later. She needs assistance *now*.'

'Indeed,' Snape agreed. 'Malfoy, take her to the hospital wing.'

Several Gryffindors started. Parkinson glared at her Head of house in a way that Harry had never seen her do. He doubted that she would have done it if Snape weren't completely focused on Hermione, who squirmed and jerked awake at last, looking blankly at the badges on Malfoy's robes, which gleamed in front of her nose. She raised her eyes to his face, and after a moment, her arms began to flail madly. He almost lost his balance, but eventually managed to dodge her arms.

'You fainted,' he said as neutrally as he could. 'It's... all right. We're taking you to the hospital wing.'

She took a moment to fully grasp what he was saying, and then she tried to sit up. He uncomfortably helped her.

'N-no, I--I can do it on my own. I--' she gasped as she swayed against him again.

McGonagall breathed deeply. 'Mr Malfoy, I believe you had your orders?'

'I can do it,' Ron and Blaise said simultaneously.

'There's no point. Mr Malfoy has lost his partner, and you both have work to do. You, in particular, should know that the director is indispensable, Mr Zabini.' McGonagall glanced at Hermione, who was having trouble breathing, and scowled at Malfoy. 'Well, what are you waiting for?'

Malfoy looked at her incredulously. Snape nodded imperceptibly, and he sighed, scooping Hermione up and making his way to the barrier that stood between them and the door. He almost looked like he wanted to hold her at arm's length. She, too, only seemed to be grasping his arms out of sheer need.

All eyes followed them as they left. Harry was rather uncomfortable with the thought that a very fragile Hermione was about to be alone with Malfoy. Snape seemed to read his mind.

'Make sure Miss Granger reaches the hospital wing in no worse a condition than the one she displays now,' he called, just as Malfoy reached the barrier. There was a tense pause before Malfoy looked over his shoulder.

'Yes, sir,' he said curtly.

'You will stay for Madam Pomfrey's diagnosis and report back to me. Miss Granger, too, will want to hear the details when she's in a condition to listen. If she is released tonight, which I doubt, you will bring her back. Understood?'

'Understood, sir,' Malfoy clipped out, stepping into Bohemian territory. Through his burgeoning panic, Harry thought that the Bohemians' faces would be priceless.

The incident had turned their focus completely away from the rehearsal, but it was very late when they finally left the Great Hall. There was something ominous about one of their own collapsing amidst them, as though gripped by an invisible, unbeatable power. Few of them could forget the mood that had begun to take hold of the wizarding world. Most couldn't avoid making eerie connections.

More than once, Blaise valiantly tried to restore the order, but he was visibly upset, and it seemed to be contagious, even though Hermione wasn't a particularly popular girl. Against all odds, it was Ron who showed a remarkable professionalism, calling Pansy and Neville to him, in order to work on Carlotta's entrance. Yet, no-one failed to notice his covert glances at the barrier.

Dinner came, and only then did Malfoy arrive, tired and paler than usual, announcing that Hermione would have to stay in the hospital wing for the night. 'She still has trouble breathing, and she can barely speak. Madam Pomfrey thinks it's safer to keep her there.'

'Well, when that one's too weak to speak...' Pansy began cheerily.

'Madam Pomfrey just wants to examine her properly. She--' Malfoy rolled his eyes. 'She asked me to tell the Gryffindors not to worry.'

Ron stood. 'Well, let's go see her, then.'

Blaise made to follow him, but Malfoy added, with an unpleasant smirk, 'She also requests that there are no visitors tonight. Only tomorrow.'

'What, she'll still be there tomorrow?'

'She might have to skip the first couple of classes. Knowing her, though, I wouldn't count on such niceties.' Malfoy picked up his script and moved far away from Ron.

That was the end of the rehearsal. They began to gather their belongings with Ron and Blaise prostrate amid them, companions in concern. At some point, Snape spoke from behind them, although nobody had noticed him moving.

'If Miss Granger isn't asleep yet, I'm quite sure she would like her friends to bid her good night.'

'But Madam Pomfrey--'

'Has a heart of gold. She'll take you in for two minutes although I wouldn't attempt a third one.'

'But--' Ron attempted.

'Unless, of course, you aren't as interested in your friend's well-being as you pretend to be, in which case...' Snape shrugged as though to imply that it was none of his business and pointed at his own chair. 'Potter, your things are over there.'

Ron and Blaise left quietly, and Harry reached for his bag. From the corner of his eye, he could see Ginny crossing the room to talk to Malfoy.

'Thank you,' he said quietly. 'For letting them visit her. They'd be miserable--'

'I didn't do it for them,' Snape replied, as if the very thought offended him. Harry looked up.

'If your many levels of misery mattered the least bit to me, I would have told you to go with them. I did it for Miss Granger.'

'Thank you for that, then. She'd have been miserable all alone, too.'

Snape smirked. 'I'm sure an attention-seeker finds a night in the hospital wing rather lonely, but I doubt Miss Granger fills those shoes as well as you do. I did it solely because her welfare is my responsibility, and it would do her no good to have two loud teenagers sitting outside the door all night. You might want to save your thanks for more deserving situations.' Snape whirled away without another word.

Harry stared at his undulating robes. Hermione's welfare was Snape's responsibility, but Harry's wasn't? The hell...?

'I'm not an attention seeker,' he said audibly, tossing his bag over his shoulder and walking out in a huff. He didn't notice Snape watching the back of his head. As he went, he could hear loose words in an argument that seemed to issue from one of the walls. It was Ginny's voice.

'... I ever find out--'

'Do... really think...?'

'Let's see... yes!'

Malfoy's answer was almost inaudible. 'I promised... wouldn't. I... my word.'

'... break it now... ends... here!'

Harry couldn't make out Malfoy's answer to that, but he couldn't be bothered with them. All he could think of was that the way Hermione's ashen face had lit up when Snape instructed Malfoy to treat her well was dreadful, and Harry never wanted to see it happen again.

Ginny's Answer

Chapter 6 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Madam Pomfrey sulked at the number of people in the hospital wing when Harry, Ron and Ginny went there early the following morning. 'She is having breakfast early--she doesn't want to skip her first class. Don't be long.'

'Is she all right now, then?' Ginny asked.

'In a manner of speaking,' Madam Pomfrey said dismissively. 'She's feeling much better.'

They had to cross the large room to reach Hermione's bed. Malfoy was leaning against the wall, looking supremely bored.

'What are you doing here?'

'Good morning to you, too.' Malfoy tilted his head towards the bed, where Blaise sat, listening to a talkative Hermione and, they guessed, holding her hand under the blanket.

'Good morning!' Her pale visage beamed upon seeing them. 'Luna's just left--she asked about you, Ron.'

Somewhere to their right, Madam Pomfrey grumbled.

'I thought it would be best to bring company,' Blaise clarified, because Ron's scowl had deepened. 'We came out of the dormitory so early, and with this curfew...'

'Without a prefect, he couldn't come,' Malfoy summed up.

'You're doing better!' Ron grinned at Hermione, ignoring the Slytherins.

'What happened, after all?' Harry asked. Hermione shrugged.

'Madam Pomfrey has done a few tests, I don't know the results yet. It was probably food poisoning, though.'

'When will you know for sure?'

'In a week or so,' Malfoy spoke from behind their backs.

'He was still here when Madam Pomfrey drew the samples,' Hermione clarified.

'I turned my back, Weasley,' Malfoy added, in response to Ron's glower, and addressed Ginny. 'I've never had to impose my presence on a woman.'

As Ginny looked at him sharply, he turned to Hermione. 'I'll go have breakfast while you say your goodbyes. I'll be right back.'

'Why?' Ron snapped.

'Granger and I have Arithmancy together, and Madam Pomfrey doesn't want her to walk around alone. She, er, politely asked me to escort your friend upstairs. Blaise, I'll be in the Great Hall.' Malfoy turned to leave. As he approached the door, he shouted over his shoulder, 'I'll deliver her to you before DADA!'

'Mister Malfoy! We don't shout here!'

'I'll give you some privacy, then,' Ginny said, patting Hermione's hand and sprinting out after him. The argument that soon erupted in the corridor was audible even through the drawn curtains.

Hermione turned to them. 'Well, did anything interesting happen after I left?'

'Nothing,' Blaise assured her. 'You weren't there.'

Ron made a gagging sound, which Harry disguised with a cough. 'And how did Malfoy treat you? Took him ages to go back.'

Hermione shrugged. 'He didn't really talk to me, just to Madam Pomfrey. He asked her a load of questions. The... tests made me feel a bit groggy, so he stayed until I felt

better. I have to say I wasn't expecting that.'

'Snape told him to stay until you were stable,' Harry said quietly.

'Really? I'll have to thank him. It was nice to have someone here--even if it was Malfoy.'

Ron whistled. 'Who knew Malfoy was so scared of Snape?'

'Yes, but we're running late and I need to get dressed. Out!'

'Well, you're welcome, Hermione...! We missed you, too,' Harry joked. She threw him a scathing look, kicking her feet under the duvet.

'See you later?' Blaise asked softly, feeling her temperature. Hermione looked expectantly at Harry and Ron.

'Oh.' Harry poked Ron in the ribs and made him turn around. They waited until Blaise's shadow crossed the room behind them to turn back to her.

'I was just waiting for him to leave, because I have to talk to you, and... well, I didn't want Blaise to hear it.'

That lifted Ron's mood significantly. Harry, however, was startled. 'Anything serious?'

Hermione looked embarrassed. 'It's just that... well, it's about Professor Snape.'

'What about him?' Harry instantly snapped.

Hermione seemed to be choosing her words. 'Well, I... I had a really bad night. Madam Pomfrey says it's normal,' she quickly added, seeing their alarmed faces. 'When... there's an infection, or something. Anyway, she says Professor Snape came to see me. Apparently, it was he who told her that I was convulsing.'

'Convulsing?' Ron was now very pale.

'It doesn't matter! I'm fine, now. He came back with her, they medicated me, and then he stayed so that she could have some sleep, poor thing. It must have been about three in the morning, and she says he only left at about six.'

There was silence.

'It was really nice of him to do that, wasn't it?' she finally said, as though they were missing the point entirely.

They agreed halfheartedly. They were more concerned about her than Snape's late-night activities. Harry wondered about Snape's newfound kindness. Had Dumbledore ordered him to act more like a human?

Hermione spotted his smirk and misunderstood his silence. 'You're not going to rub it in his face, or mock him in the corridors! We can't afford to lose more house points!'

There was such panic on her face that Harry and Ron almost burst out laughing.

'Yes, ma'am!' Ron joked, turning to leave.

In the Great Hall, Pansy gazed sympathetically at Malfoy as he glumly readied to escort Hermione to class. Much to Ron's fury, Blaise intended to go with them. Ron and he battled for the right to fuss over Hermione all afternoon. She, who had felt slightly faint after lunch, really couldn't complain, though she did feel rather overwhelmed.

In the meantime, Harry dwelt on her words about Snape. It was one thing to make sure a student was properly treated. Visiting said student and staying until dawn was quite another. What's more, Harry was the hospital wing's most frequent guest, and he couldn't recall Snape doing that for anyone in there--namely, him.

'But I'm an infantile attention seeker, and Hermione is perfect. Even her illnesses are exemplary, he thought bitterly. He felt ashamed of himself even before the thought was complete.

Your priorities, don't they need to be sorted out? an insistent voice nagged on. Harry determinedly did not think of Snape for the rest of the day.

'Attractive, isn't it?' Harry jumped at the sound of Ginny's voice. Apparently, they were back in the Great Hall for dinner. He had been so focused on not thinking of Snape that he hadn't noticed it.

'What is?'

She nodded grimly towards Malfoy, who was talking with Pansy. 'His self-entitlement. Who the hell would like that?'

Harry had no answer for that, so he resorted to telling her about Hermione's latest news. She laughed when Harry mentioned that Hermione had already begun to snap at Ron and Blaise to leave her alone.

'Look, Ginny...' Harry began, carefully, as Malfoy laughed and she looked grim again. 'You know that we're here to help you in everything you need, don't you? Like you've been here for us.'

She stared uncomprehendingly at him. 'Right... right. I know that, Harry. Hmm... thanks?' She spotted Dean and quickly added, 'Haven't spoken to him all day. I should go. See you, Harry.'

Harry nodded absently. People were filing in for dinner, and he had just noticed Snape's empty seat at the staff table. It remained empty throughout the meal. Harry munched worriedly on his dessert. An absent Snape was never a good sign. He didn't even know why he was so relieved when Snape finally arrived, mid-rehearsal, entering so swiftly, so one with the wall, that one might mistake him for a shadow.

Hermione, still disquietingly pale, had been working quietly with Malfoy all evening. Snape approached them, to work on the finale, Harry supposed. It was strangely irritating to see that he hadn't even been granted the customary glare.

'What a blessed release!' Seamus shouted in his ear. Harry winced and whirled to face a large group that was glaring at him. They were all waiting for his cue to continue the Masquerade sequence.

Harry fought the urge to look back at the trio and tried to concentrate. That night, Hermione again turned into Voldemort and took Snape away. Harry woke up in a bad mood.

An uneventful week followed. Quidditch season was about to begin, and between practice, rehearsals and massive amounts of schoolwork, it was hard to find the time or

the energy for anything else.

Hermione had felt ill on Tuesday, and by Wednesday, she was still fragile and grumpy. The best that could be said about Harry's Occlumency lesson of the day was that it had versed only his concern about her.

Snape, Malfoy and Hermione worked apart from the rest of the group that evening, and as a result, Harry did a very poor job of his own work. Strangely, considering he didn't even know what he had done, he could list every gesture Snape had made. Afterwards, both Blaise and Malfoy accompanied them to the Gryffindor tower. Harry thought he could still hear Pansy's furious rant from his dormitory.

The next day, Snape demanded that Harry join him before the end of the rehearsal for a quick read-through of a scene. Harry was falling scarily behind on his work with Seamus, but somehow, falling a bit further behind for an hour alone with Snape wasn't as daunting a prospect as it had been just two weeks ago. Before that, though, there was actual work going on, and Snape retreated to a quiet corner with a pensive Hermione, who was fiddling with a rose that someone had placed inside her script. Harry had never seen Snape behave so delicately around a student. He knew that it was due to Hermione's vulnerable condition, and part of him screamed that it must be serious. Another, rather vocal, bit of him resented the fact that he had never been on the receiving end of such treatment, even when his life had been in danger.

'Well, what are we doing?' He turned to Seamus with a sigh.

'Scene eight, Raoul's entrance, and I've told you this a dozen times. Concentrate!'

Harry easily put on an irritable expression for the scene in which Firmin pointed out to Raoul that they weren't his lover's childminders.

'*She's not with you, then?*' Malfoy asked with a concern they had never heard from him before. Harry had the sudden urge to wave frantically at Hermione and Snape, engrossed in conversation. Couldn't he see where she was? Hermione was now sliding to the floor, and Snape circled her. Harry imagined they were entering the Phantom's lair.

'Potter!'

'What?' he barked.

'Your cue,' Malfoy barked back.

Harry blinked. They were still working... and he was staring at Snape. Even that good-for-nothing Malfoy had noticed! He mentally shook his head, focusing again.

It was a joy, listening to Pansy as she ranted at 'Raoul'. They were still trying to hold back laughter when McGonagall and Ginny approached to inform them that 'Miss Daaé' had returned.

'*She needed rest,*' Ginny added.

'*May I see her?*' Malfoy eagerly demanded.

'*No, Monsieur, she will see no-one,*' McGonagall replied dignifiedly.

Harry picked up a random piece of parchment and pretended to read the Phantom's letter. '*... one last chance, blablabla, this bit is Snape's, I remain, gentlemen, your obedient servant, O.G.*'

Pansy squealed her offense, stretching her arm hugely so that they all could see her pointing at Hermione. Neville barely dodged her accusing finger! *I know who sent this. The Vicomte--her lover!*

Everybody paused to have a proper look at Malfoy's irate response, and in the second of silence that ensued, Snape's low voice reached Harry's ears. *In all your fantasies, you always knew, that man and mystery...*

'*Were both in you...*' Hermione replied meekly.

'*Can you believe this?*' Malfoy sounded outraged.

'*Sing, my Angel of Music...*' Snape instructed.

'*O traditori!*' Pansy shrieked, ignoring Seamus' frantic attempts to calm her down.

'*Let your mind start a journey through a strange, new world...*' Harry heard. There was a jab on his ribs and a whispered reproach from Neville. Harry racked his brains for his line.

'*This is a joke,*' he said absently. Hermione and Snape were so very close to each other...

'*O mentitori!*' Pansy accused.

'Harry, just a second more...!' Seamus pleaded.

Harry forcibly tore his gaze from the pair. '*Signora!*'

He and Seamus were mid-persuasive speech when Hermione came to warn Harry that Snape was expecting him. Harry fleetingly wondered how Blaise, as the director, didn't pair Hermione with Malfoy, her romantic interest, more often, instead of with Snape.

'Potter, is it possible that covering ten feet in a straight line takes you more than an hour?' Snape snarked. Harry wisely ignored him.

'Which scene, sir?'

'The final confrontation. If that face means to imply that you haven't studied it yet...'

'I have.' Harry had flipped through it once, as it had seemed so easy, but he didn't think it was worth bothering Snape with that sort of detail.

'Well, how would you approach it?'

'I... I think I'd--'

'Don't think. Do it.'

Harry obeyed, glancing at the script every now and then.

'Terrible,' Snape deadpanned. 'No wonder she chose Raoul. Sit down.'

They spent the remaining hour trying to work out ways for both of them to make the Phantom's change of heart believable. When Snape's mouth twitched for the fifth time, Harry made a mental note to work harder on the Phantom's lines, so that he could at least have a chance in an argument with the man.

'Hello! I'm so sorry to interrupt you.' Hermione bounced in. 'We're leaving. Will you be long?'

'No, we're quite done,' Snape replied before Harry had a chance to say anything. 'Don't forget what I told you, Miss Granger.'

She nodded emphatically and turned a pleading face to Harry. 'They're driving me mad. I don't need them fussing over me all the time. They're neglecting everybody else! Professor McGonagall's just told us off for not paying enough attention to our duties as prefects.'

Harry knew whom she was referring to, but he honestly didn't know how he could help her.

'You could come upstairs with us--Malfoy's agreed to come, too--so that they can take the Slytherins downstairs and leave me alone for a second. Will you?' she said, in one breath.

'Make sure there's someone to watch over Longbottom,' Snape suggested, scowling briefly at Hermione's request. 'I see he's going downstairs, and Miss Parkinson doesn't seem to be in a good mood.'

Hermione still called out a 'Thank you,' and Harry instinctively mouthed, 'Good night,' against the back of her head, but Snape's robes were already trailing behind him as he went out the door. Harry sighed. 'Malfoy's coming, you say? What a great ending to a great evening.'

'I think he's only coming because of Ginny,' Hermione confided. 'He's been trying to get a bit closer to her, hasn't he?'

Harry recalled that Hermione's own problems had kept her from hearing all the news on the peculiar situation developing between the two.

'I hope she's not getting into trouble,' Hermione murmured, echoing Harry's concerns. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that Dean might want to start worrying.

The walk to the tower went smoothly. Ginny paired with Dean, Harry with Hermione, and Malfoy, at the back, pretended to supervise the group. Ron, under loud protest, had been dragged to the Slytherin dungeons.

They were almost at the portrait when Ginny began to trail behind them, nearing Malfoy. Harry and Hermione did the same, warning Seamus to take Dean upstairs before a different sort of drama ensued. In a turn of the stairs, Malfoy seized Ginny's elbow in a manner that Ron would never have permitted, and they disappeared out of sight. Harry and Hermione stepped closer and listened intently, grateful that their housemates had developed the habit of breaking curfew to meet them at the stairs looking for gossip. This way, they went unnoticed.

'You nearly broke my arm!' Ginny snapped. 'Get--off--me!'

Harry and Hermione exchanged worried glances, but Ginny didn't insist, which they took to mean that Malfoy had obeyed.

'Well?' was the only word they could hear from him.

'I...'

'It was a simple question for a simple answer. Yes or no. Will you answer me before my grandchildren are grown?'

'I thought your grandchildren's birth depended on me.'

'And the verdict is...?' he wheezed irritably.

They couldn't make out Ginny's answer, but it soon became clear it was the one Malfoy wanted.

'Really?' they heard. He sounded like he almost couldn't believe it himself.

'Really,' Ginny confirmed. 'Reluctantly--and conditionally.'

'And grammatically, too, it seems,' he joked. 'Come on, I'm not that repulsive. I rather think I'm not repulsive at all.'

'For your sake, I hope not. If you don't behave--'

'You'll unleash hell on me and all that, I know. Are we settled? Do I have your word?'

'Yes,' she relented after a moment. 'But we'll talk tomorrow. They'll notice us missing, Malf--'

'Draco. I think the first-name basis applies now, doesn't it?'

Ginny snorted, but she didn't sound terribly exasperated upon obediently repeating, 'Draco. Draco... this is going to be hard. How do you do, Draco? I'm Ginny.'

'Hello, Ginny,' he replied warmly.

'Now, let's go!'

Harry and Hermione scrambled upstairs just in time, as the pair were turning the corner already. Ginny's eyes looked apprehensive upon meeting Hermione's, but Malfoy might as well have just won the House Cup. Harry's own concerned gaze was plainly mirrored on Hermione's.

'Dean's just lost his girlfriend, hasn't he?'

Harry walked Hermione to the bottom of the stairs to the girls' dormitories, waiting until she disappeared behind the door. Then he, too, went to bed, from where he stared out the window, considering the events of the day. He thought of that night's rehearsal. He liked big, fancy rehearsals. He liked the sense of need and belonging they gave him, and he felt guilty that he had worked so little. He thought of Dean, and of the bomb that was surely about to explode on their hands. And then he thought of Hermione, who had somehow outwitted them all and struck Snape's attention in a way that an entire generation of students, at least, had failed to do.

Harry went to sleep dwelling on the unsettling feeling that he didn't like to see them together at all.

Sentimental Exchanges

Chapter 7 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry and Hermione had decided that Ron, who didn't even like the thought of Ginny dating Dean, was best left in ignorance of her little secret with Malfoy.

'Maybe we've just heard it out of context?' Harry tried, with little conviction, alone with Hermione in the boys' dormitory. Ron had already gone downstairs for breakfast.

'Really, how many contexts can there be?' Hermione replied with a stifled yawn. She didn't seem to have had much sleep.

Harry shrugged. 'Ginny wouldn't cheat on Dean. I won't believe it until I see it.'

'I can't believe it either, but I honestly can't see what else this could mean,' she sounded defeated.

'Ginny and a Slytherin. This is going to be just great,' Harry snorted.

'Hey!'

'And your Slytherin, by the way? How is he?' he swiftly added.

Hermione looked confused for a moment.

'Blaise,' he clarified. 'Don't even pretend nothing is going on.'

She sighed. 'I--honestly don't know. I... I didn't want to comment on it because... well, Ron would have been unbearable...'

'Ron isn't here, now. Is there anything wrong?'

Hermione's gaze drifted as she struggled for words. 'It's... fine. It's fantastic. A fantastic friendship.' Harry's mouth formed an understanding 'Oh.'

'I know what everybody's thinking. I hear them in the corridors. We're not really a popular couple,' she finally elaborated.

'That's not very surprising. But that's not what we're talking about,' Harry reminded her.

She tapped her fingers on the headboard, biding her time. 'He's been really supportive, and he's really caring, and... and I adore him. Don't make that face I do. The thought of spending a few minutes with him, talking about the things that we both care about, is just...' She let out a happy sigh.

'Basically, he's perfect.'

'Pretty much. But I don't think I'm in love with him.'

Harry stared at her. 'Any particular reason?'

'It's just that... If I were in love, I'd know, wouldn't I? And there's no... well, there was that day in Hogsmeade--'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed emphatically.

'But back in school, it's just... I don't know how to put it. This isn't really my field of expertise,' she confessed, 'and I don't really believe the whole theory that we see stars and that time stops and there are sparks when we're in love, but... I'd know, wouldn't I? You recognise the feeling, don't you? You don't need to ponder whether or not you're in love, do you?'

'Don't look at me. I *loved* Cho when I was thirteen, remember?'

She smiled in spite of herself. 'If you say so.'

'I say we vote against complicated levels of affection. Let's all fall in love with each other,' Harry added flamboyantly.

'I support that,' she sighed again.

'Still,' he added tentatively, 'shouldn't you sort out all of that before getting together? You *are* together, right?'

'I guess... Together-ish. For now...'

 she admitted, turning a sharper gaze to him. 'How about you?'

'Me?' he repeated, hair standing on end even more than usual.

'Yes... I never got the chance to ask how you're coping, now that Cho's gone and all...'

'Fine,' he answered sincerely. 'I suppose it wasn't meant to be, as people say. It didn't really make such a difference when she left. It just... fizzled out. My great, deep, teenage love,' he added jokingly.

'And it really doesn't affect you any more?' Hermione sounded doubtful.

'There's a lot of things that don't affect me any more,' he commented grimly.

There was a short silence. 'Harry, about Sir--'

'I'm hungry,' he cut her off, sitting up. 'Let's have breakfast.' She grasped his hand.

'You know we're here if you want to talk,' she said quickly before he had a chance to wrench his hand away.

'I don't want to talk. I want to eat,' he said curtly.

Hermione sat up to look him in the eye. 'A few weeks ago, it looked like you were beginning to go back to what you--'

'I'll never go back to what I was, Hermione,' Harry replied firmly.

'I know that,' she patiently explained, 'but you looked more... comfortable with what happened. You were laughing again. And you're not any more.'

'I'm just tired, we all are.'

'Harry, don't you think we know you better than that?'

There was a longer silence. Hermione finally let his hand slip out of hers and took a step to the door.

'I'm not sure how I feel... about someone,' he blurted out, without thinking.

Hermione, who hadn't seen his face as he said that, turned to him in glee. 'Really?! But that's wonderful... isn't it?' She eyed his glum demeanour quizzically.

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. 'Not really.'

She suddenly turned serious. 'Harry, what's going on?'

For a fleeting moment, Harry considered telling her everything. At the last second, he grinned. 'How do you feel about Malfoy? I've been wondering if it's worth competing with Ginny for this new, improved version of him.'

Hermione blinked at him at the mention of Malfoy's name and then pursed her lips to avoid laughing. 'At least your hair looks better than hers next to his,' she replied.

He grinned more earnestly. 'We'd be fabulous,' he insisted flamboyantly, putting on a French accent.

Ron's head poked through the door. 'Children, you've been alone for ages, and we have youngsters downstairs. They're having a field day, and I'm scarred.'

Harry and Hermione sprinted down to the Great Hall, chasing him.

For the rest of the day, they watched warily as Malfoy and Ginny took every available opportunity to spend time together. No-one missed their sudden proximity. Dean grew quieter and more sullen as the day wore on, Pansy became more vocal with every quiet conversation, Ron's lips took on a bluish hue from being pursed for so long. Harry was possibly the only one trying to analyse their dynamics coldly. As they once again talked apart from the group during a break, he thought that he couldn't imagine a colder, more detached torrid affair. In plain view, even.

'Perhaps there's hope,' he silently concluded.

However, when Hermione sat next to Malfoy for lunch, so as to finish a conversation about that night's rehearsal, Ginny put on an apprehensive expression that lasted throughout the meal.

'Malfoy and I might start working together in a few days,' Hermione later mentioned, as they sat in the common room, Harry readying for Occlumency and Ron trying to figure out the matter with his broomstick, which tilted to the left with each dive.

'I thought you were doing that already,' Ron commented, peering over the manual for broomstick emergencies.

'I'm talking about schoolwork. The teachers think that working in trios is more productive than in duos, and Blaise and I thought that maybe Malfoy--'

'Why Malfoy?!' Ron asked somewhat briskly.

Hermione flushed a bit. 'Blaise likes him, and...'

'And you like *us*,' Ron completed, reddening as well. 'Why does it have to be Malfoy?'

Hermione looked more uncomfortable by the second. Harry stopped trying to take out the spot in the front of his robes and turned to Ron, stating the obvious, 'He's got better marks than we do.'

She looked even more uncomfortable. 'That's not it at all. It's just... well, it doesn't matter. I just wanted you to know about this because if we spend more time together, maybe I'll have a chance to find out exactly what is going on between him and Ginny.'

Harry couldn't help thinking that, if they rehearsed together as was their duty, she wouldn't need to find more expedients to spend time with him.

Ron's anger had evaporated at the mention of Ginny's name. 'You'd do that?'

She nodded with a smile. 'Blaise and I are working together in most classes, so we really will be spending a ridiculous amount of time together.'

'And that is apparently a good thing,' Harry smirked from beneath his freshly scourgified jumper.

'In other news, Neville's developing an affection for Death Eaters and Snape's becoming popular,' Ron joked.

Harry froze at the mention of that name, frantically trying to clear his mind.

'That wasn't funny, Ron,' Hermione sounded stern. Taking Harry's furrowed brow to mean that he didn't want to go to Occlumency ('Can you blame him?' Ron smirked.), she suddenly suggested they went with him. With the uncomfortable sensation that his stomach and his lungs had swapped places, Harry quickly reassured her that there was absolutely no need for that.

'He won't even let you attend it,' he insisted.

'He doesn't need to,' Ron piped in, eager to get on Hermione's good graces. 'We'll just cheer you up a bit on your way down and wait till it's over, so that we can cheer you up a lot more on your way up. You'll need it.'

'I can't believe we didn't think of this before,' Hermione added brightly.

'We'll wait across the corridor if he wants us to,' Ron continued, ignoring Harry's protests. 'The farther the better, to be frank,' he added, turning on his heel to argue with Ginny, who had overheard this part and wanted to go with them.

'Let her come, Ron,' Hermione relented. 'Why shouldn't she, after all?' This prompted Dean to announce that he, too, was going with them. That day, Harry reached Snape's door with a rather large escort behind him.

Snape opened the office door with a raised eyebrow. 'I don't recall having scheduled an extra lesson for Gryffindors.'

Harry, whose tongue felt slightly too big for his mouth, didn't answer. There were footsteps from across the corridor. Blaise and Malfoy had just seen them. 'A Gryffindor party down here?' the latter commented. Neither seemed to be in a good mood.

'We're just keeping Harry company,' Hermione explained as Blaise swiftly reached her. Harry wished she would shut up. Dean had taken Ginny's hand and discreetly positioned himself away from Malfoy. Ron stood between Malfoy and Hermione.

'We'll wait for you, then,' Malfoy unexpectedly announced.

Even Ginny looked perplexed.

'You don't know your way around the dungeons,' Malfoy elaborated with a keen rolling of his eyes. If anything happens to you, we'll be blamed. We're waiting.' In his defence, he didn't seem terribly excited with his own decision.

Harry searched for words to justify the insanity of the moment, but he could find none, and he ultimately decided to not to push Snape's patience further. He entered his office in silence, shutting the door quietly.

'That's quite the escort, Potter. Do your friends think I'm going to kill you in Remedial Potions?'

'It was Hermione's idea. She just thought I might--' Harry caught himself, suddenly feeling very cold. He had a feeling Snape didn't need Occlumency to find out what Hermione had thought.

'Such a hard, tortured existence you lead,' Snape finally said.

Harry felt hot in the face. 'I told them not to--'

'Of course you did. Wand out.'

More invested than ever in not letting Snape break into his mind, Harry instantly obeyed.

'Legilimens!'

Harry reeled. Scattered images of his conversation with Hermione came and passed, and then Hermione was in the hospital wing, and then rehearsing with Snape, turning into Voldemort...

He came to, lying on the floor, Snape looming over him. He hadn't protected his mind.

'Was that Miss Granger turning into the Dark Lord I saw, Potter?'

'That, huh... that was just a dream I had, sir.'

'A dream.'

Harry nodded. 'Just a silly dream.'

'Was there any particular reason why your best friend was turning into your worst enemy?'

There was, but Harry would rip out his own tongue before telling him about it. He was beginning to think that he was his own worst enemy. 'No, sir. It was just a dream. It didn't mean anything at all.'

'And yet you remember it clearly...' Snape said slowly. 'Miss Granger does feature very... prominently in your recent memories.'

What could he say to that? 'Yes, sir,' he finally replied.

'Let's try again.' Snape trained his gaze on Harry's. *'Legilimens!'*

Through the flashing whirlwind of images behind his lids, Harry could sense That Memory looming nearer. The Ministry room was drawing in, the people inside it were more solid, the spells they cast more colourful. Harry wanted, with all his might, to push it back, to bury it under the others, or better yet, to wipe it from his head entirely, but he couldn't remember how to do it, his wand arm was limp by his side, and the memory was clearer still...

... and a commotion outside broke the spell. Snape had lowered his arm. Harry's fuzzy sight focused slowly, and he looked at the man himself. Snape was staring at the door.

Then Harry's brain started working again. The noise outside was abnormal. There were scared voices. Something had happened. Harry was about to burst out the door when he was seized by the arm and handed a handkerchief. He blinked. Snape pulled him closer with an exasperated sigh, unfurled the little sheet briskly and cleaned Harry's face of the cold sweat that had broken there without him noticing it. Then he was finally released, and they both ran outside.

Hermione lay on the floor, covered in a sheen of sweat much like Harry's. Apart from the odd spasm, she was motionless.

'What happened here?' Snape asked, eyeing his Slytherins suspiciously and sparing the Gryffindors a glare.

'Same thing as the other time,' a very pale Ron informed him, kneeling next to Hermione, whose head rested on Malfoy's lap. Blaise was trying to reanimate her whilst Ginny and Dean uselessly tried to push them to give her some breathing space.

'Let's take her to the hospital wing!' Harry said roughly, joining Ron, Blaise and Malfoy in their instant attempt to pick her up. Snape pushed them aside and scooped Hermione up himself.

'Go back upstairs, the lot of you. It's almost dinner time, and there's a long night ahead.'

'But she's our friend!' Ron groaned.

'And *my business*,' Snape told him coldly. 'Potter, I'll schedule your next lesson later. Perhaps you could pay more attention to regular Potions and spare us both this trouble.' Wrapping his arms protectively around his student, Snape sprinted up the corridor, leaving the shadow of his billowing robes and a very worried group in his wake.

That night, they rehearsed without Hermione. Snape arrived very late, apparently for the sole purpose of talking to McGonagall, which irritated Harry immensely. As Snape left McGonagall's side to join Malfoy in what Harry assumed was some quick, dismissive work, Harry began to snap at those nearer him. After a while, even Pansy had left him alone. Tonight, there were no complaints about the small amount of work he got done.

When they finally finished, not a minute too soon, in Harry's opinion, he joined Ron, Ginny and Blaise, fuming while they discussed the day. They were on their way to the door when Snape intercepted them.

'Madam Pomfrey would like you to know that you may visit Miss Granger immediately.'

'Last time no-one was allowed to visit her. Why the change?' Harry sulked, hating Hermione. Thankfully for him, his sullen face could pass for worry.

Snape's glare glided over them to meet Harry's. 'I can only imagine an exception was opened because Mr Potter cannot be forced to wait an entire night to see an ailing

friend.' Before Harry tried to kill him with a glower, he addressed the others, 'Do you want to see her or not?'

Harry was the quietest of an already glum group as they made their way out at a faster pace. His hand, with a mind of its own, had crept up his left arm all night to lay spidery touches on the spot Snape had seized to clean off his sweat. He repeatedly, self-consciously, shoved his hands in his pockets, repeating the movement upon finding himself unobserved. His fingertips were traipsing up his elbow again when they reached the big, arched door beyond which Hermione lay. He briefly wondered when and why Malfoy had been allowed to join them, but soon forgot about him, because his hand really was acting of its own volition and he had only just hit him that Snape's touch hadn't disgusted him. The warmth in the pit of his stomach was worrying, and he had the feeling that it should make him feel guilty for some reason, but he couldn't really remember why.

The guilt came soon enough, in a painful jolt that hit him as soon as they were ushered into the wing, under severe scolding from Madam Pomfrey for being so loud at her patient's bedside.

Hermione looked tiny; a pale, sad rag doll plopped on the thin bed, her eyelids half-shut, through which they could see a sliver of bloodshot, unnaturally bright eyes. She spotted them and tried to smile, but the painful motion was accompanied by a faint sigh, and she had to open her eyes more widely to make sure they noticed the acknowledgement. Harry wished she hadn't. He could see her eyes clearly, now, and those balls of reddish light looked so very out of place on her usually warm, welcoming face...

There was a bitter taste climbing up Harry's throat. He had hated her for getting Snape's undivided attention when Harry hadn't managed it in the numerous times he had been in danger. Now he loved her so dearly that he couldn't imagine how anyone else could feel differently. He would empty his Gringotts vault, and all others, to hear her snap that he should be catching up on his homework. Surely the books in the library missed her already? Surely the paintings were waiting for her daily visit for a few minutes' worth of conversation about Hogwarts' history?

Harry directed his gaze at his own feet, hoping to control his emotions before Hermione had a proper look at him. Through the corner of his eye, he saw his concern mirrored on everyone's faces. Even Malfoy had pursed his lips and looked uncomfortable with the vision.

Is this baby Malfoy's first encounter with real pain? Daddy never took him on Dark revels? Harry thought venomously, hating Malfoy for not looking more upset. And then he hated Snape for not being there, for not realising that Hermione needed his attention. Had he not realised that this was serious? Was that why he hadn't let Harry visit her right away the first time she had been taken there? Why wasn't the man putting his ability to stopper death to some use and brewing one of his precious potions to help her already?

'Harry...' Hermione's heaving chest brought his reflections to an end. Neither Ron nor Blaise looked jealous that she had addressed him first. 'Sorry...' she breathed, 'I wanted to cheer you up and look where I got you. Like you're not here often enough.' She took a deep breath.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, brushing her sweaty fringe out of her forehead and fighting to make his voice come out. 'Never mind. At least you're the one lying there, for a change.'

She laughed weakly and immediately brought her hand to her chest, as though to still it. Harry instantly placed his hand over hers. 'Does it hurt?'

'It's better, now,' she replied bravely. 'They might let me out tonight.'

'Don't even think about it,' Blaise cut her off with a valiant attempt at a playful tone. 'You might bring the ghosts back to life with the scare.'

'You think?' Her chest heaved again. Harry tried to remove his hand, fearing it might hurt her, but she held on tightly to it. 'I like it. It's cold. Are you ill, too?'

Harry shook his head with a gulp. She smiled. His insides burned with remorse. He was still petting her hair when Snape arrived. He looked at them, twisted his mouth into a sneer, and then sat across from Harry.

'Did you do as I told you, Miss Granger?' he asked without preamble. She nodded weakly. He felt her temperature.

'And did it work?' She opened her mouth, but he continued, 'Just nod.' Her head shook diagonally.

'Have you talked to Madam Pomfrey about it?' He was now tilting her head with the tips of his fingers to examine her neck.

They watched this awkward exchange in confusion. Harry sniffed impatiently.

'I'm afraid I need to examine you again, Miss Granger,' Snape informed her slowly, 'to see if the results match.'

She looked slightly wary, but after a moment, she rested her head against his hand in acquiescence. Harry caught himself wondering if Snape's hand felt as cold as his own. Snape then turned to the others.

'You'll have to leave.' He had chosen the tone one uses with the very dim. They snapped to attention.

'Leave? Why?' Ron asked. Snape raised an eyebrow, tilting his head towards Hermione.

'Isn't it obvious?' Hermione flushed. Harry felt an unpleasant pang.

Their vocal complaints useless, they had to bid Hermione good night, promising to be there early next morning. They slipped out around Harry, who was rooted to the spot, watching as Snape's hand waited for the group to walk down the corridor to move from Hermione's neck to her chest, and right into Harry's. Harry jumped. Snape seemed to have only just noticed that he was there.

'Is there any problem with your ears, Potter?' His hand wasn't cold after all, Harry realised with some surprise. It was perfectly normal. And yet, somehow, it had sent a shiver down his spine. Snape's hand withdrew with the speed of lightning, and a wave of rage came out of nowhere to engulf Harry. Snape didn't care. He wasn't worried, or cold, or sweaty. He was just standing there, doing as Dumbledore had told him to do and looking bored beside Hermione's sickbed, and he, Harry, was wondering about his body heat. The unexpected mental image made him go pale.

'I-- I'd like to stay a bit longer. Sir,' he stammered. 'I'll... I'll turn around.'

'Oh, will you?' Snape sounded irritated. It was his first display of emotion that evening.

Harry considered his options for a moment, his hand still on Hermione's. 'Please,' he finally added, in a tone that didn't imply a request at all.

'I'd like him to stay, Professor,' Hermione softly joined him.

'I was thinking of your comfort, but have it your way,' Snape relented, more irritated still. 'Turn,' he barked at Harry, focusing immediately on Hermione.

Harry stared at the wall for an hour, listening to Snape's footsteps behind him, to the clinking of phials, to the murmured questions that he wasn't sure Hermione was answering. She made a muffled, keening sound once that almost made him turn to them. The thought that all this was just the soundtrack to a serious affair was momentarily run over by a desire to join Hermione in the bed and have Snape examine him, too. He had to suppress a laugh at the thought of their faces if he did that.

There was a loud bang behind him. Harry turned to see that Snape had left without saying good night. Hermione, who had pulled the duvet up to her chin, said, 'He wants to examine the phials in his office. He said he'd come back later.'

'I hope not,' Harry mumbled, knowing he couldn't tell her that he was beginning to fear his own reactions around Snape.

'He's being very helpful, you know?' Hermione scolded, stern even through the faint voice.

Too helpful, in Harry's opinion. Snape's attitude again looked too overbearing for his taste. 'Dumbledore would kill him.' Hermione wanted to retort, but he cut her off, 'Let's not talk about him. Do you feel better, now? You've gained some colour.'

'Professor Snape gave me a potion to ease the pain,' she said apologetically. 'He said he might teach us how to brew it next year. If we learn the basic theory now, it won't be so hard, and I think it will be really useful...' She launched into a description of her plans for their NEWT level, and Harry sat on his knees beside the bed, listening to her with his head in his arms. After a while, the potion began to wear off, and Hermione had to adjust her speech to her frailty again. In a few minutes, they were contemplating each other in silence, content just to be together, wishing Ron could be there with them.

Sometime later, Harry's body heaved involuntarily. Sighing, he tried to readjust his legs on the floor, but he could no longer touch it--he was propped against something, his head bouncing softly on his chest as he breathed. He sleepily wondered if they were having an earthquake, but then he was pulled higher and wrapped more securely, and he was so tired that he never really woke up. He was vaguely aware of having been dropped onto a soft surface. He was cold. He quickly grasped at the retreating warmth that had lifted him and held onto it, going to sleep with the idle notion that this was much more comfortable than the floor.

An Aborted Kiss

Chapter 8 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

The early sun was ghosting over him when he woke up. He shut his eyes firmly against it and tried to ignore it by rolling over, but he couldn't there was something on him. Opening his right eye just enough to make out shapes through his lashes, he recognised a sheet and a duvet. With a grumble, he buried his head in his pillow and ignored the unexpected weight. He was too comfortable to move. Yet his bed seemed to have grown harder overnight. And unless the dormitory window that been *engorgioed*... where was he? He cracked his bleary eyes open and blinked against the sun. He kicked the linen instinctively and whatever sat on top of him slid unceremoniously to the floor.

'You're awake!' The familiar voice reminded him of where he was, but it also made him crouch under the bedclothes. 'Harry!'

With a protesting moan, he buried his head more deeply in the pillow, realising only then that it was... peculiar. It was warm. He rubbed his nose against it and it tapped his cheek. It could not be a good sign. With a tremendous effort, he turned his head towards the source of the voice and opened his eyes. Beyond his very white, very regular pillow was another bed, from where Hermione smiled at him, propped up on a scandalous amount of pillows.

'Good morning!'

He moaned a reply and had a quick look downwards. He was covered in paper. There were rolls of parchment precariously perched on his legs, on his thighs, scattered sheets beside him that must have slid from his torso. How odd. Tilting his head to the other side, he saw only darkness. He blinked at the size of his dark, moving pillow and woke up completely.

It was Snape, reclined on the bed, with his hand under Harry's head. Harry's eyes widened. He had slept on Snape? An inconvenient inner voice quipped that things seemed to be looking up, but he didn't have the time to argue with himself. He felt a bit ill. Flashes of the previous night came to his mind. His faint recollection of being picked up hadn't been a dream? The dawning comprehension made him look up with a shyness that he had never shown this particular teacher. His cheek was tapped again.

'Potter, if I could have my hand back?'

Harry's head jerked in response, and Snape withdrew his hand, flexing the fingers to get some feeling back in them. They must have been still for hours, if Harry had... He sat bolt upright. Random pieces of parchment fell to the floor, and he focused on them rather than on the affair unfolding on the bed. Hermione, equally immersed in parchment, answered his doubts, pointing at one roll after another. 'Those are my homework, those are notes on my, er, condition...'

'What is it, after all?'

She shrugged, pointing to her own bed. 'Not sure, yet. That is a transcript of my lines... There must be some on the floor, as well... And those on top of you are Professor Snape's,' she finished brightly. For a dying girl, she had a great deal of energy.

'Miss Granger has just been informed that she has to remain here for the day, so she wanted to make up for lost time,' Snape said plainly, turning to her. 'You'll leave tonight, if all goes well.' Harry didn't like his appraising look.

'I'll tell Madam Pomfrey that you're both up and ready for breakfast,' he added, sitting up and throwing Harry off-balance.

'But...' Hermione waved a roll of parchment significantly.

'You've been up since five in the morning, Miss Granger. You need to eat--particularly in your condition,' Snape said firmly, going after Madam Pomfrey.

Trying to ignore the loss of heat brought on by Snape's sudden departure, Harry turned to Hermione. 'You look so much better today.'

She smiled. 'It was really nice of you to stay with me. This can be really lonely.'

He nodded. 'That's why I wanted to stay. I didn't really mean to stay for the night, though,' he had to confess.

'I know. You fell asleep against the edge of my bed.' Judging by her face, his attitude was all the more worthy because of it. 'Professor Snape moved you to that one.'

Harry froze. 'He what?'

'I was sort of drifting in and out of sleep, and I saw him pick you up. It was nice of him.' Harry's face must have expressed a different opinion altogether because she swiftly added, 'Don't make a storm in a teacup. He must have thought you were going to be sore.'

'Hermione, when has he cared?'

She shrugged. 'Up until recently, I wouldn't have guessed he'd take such good care of me, either. Maybe he's trying to change?'

'Was he here all night?'

She picked up the tray that had appeared on her bedside table and looked pensive for a moment. 'Now that you mention it, he must have. It was pretty late when you came in last night, and... well, you heard him, I woke up at five. He was already here. Or... there,' she added hesitantly, looking at his bed.

'Hmm.'

He must be much more expressive than he thought because, again, she promptly added with great care, 'Has he... done anything to you?'

'What would he have done?' he replied dismissively.

'I don't know, you just look so... anyway. I have to say that when I woke up and asked if we could work for a bit, I thought he'd... move over here... seeing as you're not on the best of terms, and all. But he didn't,' she went on, more hesitantly still.

'His arm was under my head,' Harry replied slowly, eyes on his own lap. 'He couldn't really move it.'

Hermione's eyes widened. 'And he didn't... He really is changing...!'

Harry picked up his own tray silently. Hermione giggled. 'He could be in love. Can you imagine?'

'Not really.' Harry stared at the large breakfast that he was somehow expected to be eating after one such awakening.

Shortly afterwards, Harry had to go upstairs to change for Quidditch practice. He promised to come back to have lunch with her, but Hermione was already deeply engrossed in the scroll of parchment in front of her nose.

After practice, where Harry was surrounded by people wanting to know about Hermione, he took the usual group to visit her. They found her yawning over an essay, and Snape sitting beside her. He stood and left as soon as the group entered. Ron and Blaise took their positions on either side of her.

'Nice flowers,' Ginny commented, looking at a rather large bouquet sitting on the bedside table. Harry really didn't know much about wizarding flowers, and he couldn't tell if they were all peculiar, or if this particular set had been charmed, but these were beautiful, unusual pearly roses with large, wavy petals sprawling around the cup. They had dabs of orange around the cup, which spanned out slowly, giving the creamy petals a golden tint and giving the edges a rosy glow. The continuous process was so slow that the effect became rather nice.

'Are they magical?' he asked.

Hermione considered them for a moment. 'I think they've been charmed. I've never seen roses with moving colours. These are my favourites, though. They're a bit hard to find around here.'

'Can I have one?' Ginny asked. 'I've never seen any like these.'

Hermione carefully picked one of the largest ones and handed it to Ginny. 'You haven't? I thought I'd shown you...'

'... a picture. It was you in... was that your parents' garden...? Next to a bush of them. But I couldn't really see them properly.'

'Oh, no, that was at the garden of an old schoolmate of mine... when I was little. That's where I first saw them.'

Ginny snapped her fingers. 'That was it. They're really nice. Who sent them?'

Hermione shrugged. 'The note came without a name.'

'Note?' said Ron.

Hermione nodded once, pulling a pearly note from under the vase. 'I'm sorry I can't visit you today. Get well soon.'

'That's it?'

Harry tuned out. He had a faint suspicion that he knew who the sender was. *Charming petals must be child's play for him...*, he thought, sighing at the sight of the two huge pillows on the other bed.

Nonsense, he wouldn't, he told himself silently, petting the creases on the pillow Snape had slept on.

They were sent out of the room soon after by Ginny, who wanted a private conversation with Hermione. Blaise followed them out, to Ron's immense delight. Harry, who had scanned the hospital wing for other presences as they left, thought that Ron wouldn't be so cheery if he had spotted Malfoy's Slytherin badge slipping into the room, as Harry had.

Back in the common room, waiting aimlessly for the rehearsal, they considered catching up on their homework. Harry's pile was scarily high he was sure that if the illness hadn't killed Hermione, the sight of this would. Taking out quills, ink, parchment and books, he settled on an armchair by the window, away from the others. He honestly meant to work. But his first piece of homework was Potions, and soon, his mind drifted from the cauldrons to their wielder.

He sighed. This could not be happening. *I shouldn't have told Hermione anything* he thought bitterly, looking out the window at the school grounds. Snape was everywhere he glanced. Over there, he had caught Harry and Ron arriving in the flying Ford Anglia. On that other spot, Snape had listened to Karkaroff's concerns. The pitch, where Snape had once refereed a match... Harry wondered if it had been only his presence that had made Snape favour the Slytherins so unashamedly. And over there, the sixteen-year-old Snape had been publicly humiliated because Sirius was bored... Sirius... Sirius, who, so many years later, had risked his freedom and his life to attend a match and watch Harry play. Sirius, who would be beside himself with disappointment if he knew about his godson's inner conflict.... if he were still here to see it...

His quill had punched a hole in the parchment, but Harry didn't notice.

They were working on a rather chaotic scene of Act Eight when Snape and Hermione arrived. They were so late they almost needn't have bothered to go.

'Harry, please. Don't lose your concentration now,' Blaise called. He was the only Slytherin who addressed Harry by his first name. He imagined Blaise did it to please Hermione, but he personally thought he would do himself a better service if he spent more time with his girlfriend. He was brought back to reality by a shove from Pansy.

'*You have reviled me!*'

'The Angel sees, the Angel knows...' McGonagall said gravely as Malfoy leaned sadly against a wall.

'You have rebuked me!' Pansy now shoved Seamus. Blaise asked her for a little more restraint. She tried to argue that Carlotta was a very physical character, to no avail.

'You have replaced me!'

'Please, Signora, we beseech you...' Harry pleaded, eyes trained on the other end of the room. Snape had only one line in this sequence, and he had chosen to work with Hermione instead of sitting around with them.

'This hour shall see your darkest fears...' McGonagall said darkly.

'Flattering child, you shall know me...' Harry heard.

Pansy heaved a sob. *'Abbandonata! Desiderata! O, sventurata!'*

Seamus sighed in exasperation at Harry's fixed gaze. *'Look at your face in the mirror I am there inside!'*

'The Angel knows, the Angel hears...' Hermione looked very tired, Snape was leading her to a chair...

'Abbandonata! Disgraziata!'

Harry and Seamus approached Pansy adoringly and the others surrounded them.

'No vo cantar!' She pouted hugely, drawing a smile from Neville, who had joined a different group.

'The world wants you!' Seamus flashed her a smile, and Harry bowed as though to kiss her hand. With some coaching from Blaise and a great deal of laughter, they all managed to sing about their *Prima Donna*.

Harry's ears rang with the loud, rambunctious ending. *'Sing, prima donna, once more!'*

They were still in a circle, Pansy beaming at the centre, when a voice came, sending shivers down Harry's back. *'So, it's to be war between us!'*

'Once more!' They boomed in return.

They finally seemed to be getting somewhere. It had been their first attempt at a sequence with a large group, and although Blaise tried to be cautious about their enthusiasm, they couldn't wait to rub in the Bohemians' faces that they, too, were doing well.

'This isn't so bad, after all, is it?' Ron grinned. 'At least, it's a laugh.'

Hermione, followed by Snape, joined him. 'I hope I can sing it with you, next time.' Casting a glance at Snape, she immediately added, 'I mean, working with you is very enriching, Professor--'

He didn't even seem to have heard her. He had turned to Harry. 'What's the schedule for your Quidditch practice, Potter?'

This was unexpected. 'We don't have one, sir.'

'Very well, then, your next lesson will take place on Wednesday. And if you bring your friends along, make sure they don't faint in my corridor.' He turned back to Hermione without waiting for an answer. Harry nearly had a heart stop. He couldn't deal with another Occlumency lesson so soon--but Snape wasn't even aware of his presence any more.

'And tonight, there was no problem. You feel well, don't you?'

'It could just be a coincidence...'

'Three and four coincidences in a row, Miss Granger?'

She looked miserable. 'I can't believe I...'

'I can,' Snape said calmly.

Malfoy and Ginny were approaching. She joined Dean, who hadn't noticed her absence because Seamus was fiercely trying to distract him. Malfoy addressed Hermione to ask her about their group work. 'Quidditch season's starting and we won't have much time then.'

'But have the teachers authorised us to...?'

He nodded. 'The headmaster told us today. You were still in the hospital wing.'

Hermione sighed. 'I knew I'd miss something important.'

Malfoy smirked. 'Do you feel better, by the way? You can't go on fainting on us when we have deadlines.'

Blaise joined them to discuss their work and Ginny looked away. That night, Ron and Pansy supervised the Slytherins. Malfoy and Ginny ignored each other all the way up to the tower.

The next few days couldn't have been more hectic. The Quidditch teams had whinged until the staff agreed to give them extra practice time, to be scheduled when necessary, which provided them with freshly burdened timetables every day. Blaise, too, had apparently decided that two and a half months was too little time for teenagers to put on an end-of-year performance. And the teachers had found a new past-time--showing them with homework.

But their nightly schedule was unfortunately lighter, and the enveloping silence invited Harry to linger over all those thoughts he dodged so vehemently during the day. Snape seemed to have become sufficiently familiar with the roads of his mind to take up residence inside it. Wednesday morning came, and Harry picked at his food absently, wondering how he could possibly keep it from Snape that in that night's dream, Harry hadn't been alone in bed. The scene had been a wee bit too vivid for Harry's overworked hormones.

'Harry.'

'Hmm?'

'Let's never discuss strategies after the rehearsals again.' Ron yawned.

'Hmm-mm.'

'And no more... Where's Ginny?'

Harry glanced blearily around. 'Not with Malfoy.'

Ron returned to his toast with a muttered, 'Okay.'

'Hermione's with him, though.'

'Good. Less time alone with Zabini.'

'I'd prefer Blaise over Malfoy any time you asked me.'

'That fellow is not good enough for her.' Ron's tone held finality. Harry smiled into his pumpkin juice, wondering if Ron would ever find it in himself to be honest with Hermione.

That afternoon, they had class. Again and again. And then Quidditch practice. And only then did Harry sprint to Occlumency, not even bothering to change out of his Quidditch robes.

'You're late, Potter.'

Harry, who had left an hour early and missed the Snitch in order to be there on time, gritted out an, 'I'm sorry,' drawing out his wand and bracing himself without waiting for Snape's command.

'How is Miss Granger?'

Harry's concentration vanished. 'I'm sorry?'

'You came alone today.' Snape smirked disagreeably. 'Is she all right?'

'She's... fine. Huh, thanks. She just... I've just had Quidditch practice--she didn't go.'

'Hmm. *Legilimens.*'

Harry swore silently. Snape had caught him off guard, and memories, recent and old, swirled around him. There was he, meeting Ron for the first time, fighting the dragon in the Tournament, being locked in the cupboard by Uncle Vernon; singing during rehearsal, the night before, dreaming of Snape the night before...

'*Protego!*'

Snape's office came back into view. Snape was gazing at him fixedly, wand lowered. Harry stuck his chin out defiantly, knowing that a wave of heat had rushed to his face. Perhaps the memory had been too fuzzy for Snape to understand, he dared hope, as no scathing reproach came.

Finally, Snape spoke calmly--perhaps too calmly. 'You must defend your mind through its own will, not with a spell.*Legilimens.*'

'*Masquerade!*'

They were working on the Masquerade Ball, spurred on by the good results in *Prima Donna*, and Harry was still sore from all the times he had hit the floor in Snape's office.

'*Hide your face so the world will never find you!*'

Harry looked around self-consciously. Snape sat by himself, waiting for his line. Malfoy and Hermione, holding hands, stood centre stage. Everyone else chorused so loudly around them that the absence of music went unnoticed. After a while, Blaise bellowed, 'Break, everyone! Draco, Ginny, Professor McGonagall, would you come with me, please?'

'We really need a choir, don't we? This isn't nearly as impressive with just us,' Ron commented to Harry and Neville, as people disbanded in small groups.

'Come again?' Harry joked, tapping his ringing ears. He waved at Hermione, who was walking their way, but Snape chose that moment to peer over a parchment and call her to him.

Harry soon found that despoiling the dignity of Snape's entire family during their break was an effective source of comfort. Ron, on the other hand, found a succinct way to voice Harry's feelings. 'Git.'

They regained their positions and Harry did his best to stand directly in front of Snape, looking him in the eye.

'*Masquerade! Stop and stare at the sea of smiles around you!*'

Snape had smiled in his dream, but he wasn't smiling now, and Harry loathed himself for feeling so affected by that simple fact. Snape approached the noisy group majestically. He walked stiffly, almost in a wooden way, but with the expression of one who owned not only the place but also the people therein. Transfixed, Harry stopped singing.

'*Why so silent, good messieurs? Did you think I'd left you for good?*' He leered. Harry, grasping at straws to retain his sanity, wondered if Snape had drawn his inspiration for those gestures from Lord Voldemort.

Beckoning Hermione closer just as he elegantly threatened the group, Snape finished with just a whiff of amusement, '*Remember, there are worse things than a shattered chandelier...*'

Reaching for the neckline of Hermione's school robes without quite touching her, Snape made a brisk, whipping movement, as though ripping something from her.

'*Your chains are still mine,*' he hissed commandingly, and Harry lost track of everything that happened from then on. He had a vague idea of a romantic moment between Malfoy and Hermione, but his one solid thought was that he was *so glad* there would be no Occlumency for a few days.

'Harry!'

'Hmm-mm,' he groaned.

'Harry!' Ron elbowed him.

'What?' He looked up from his scribbled parchment unwillingly.

'Don't you think there's something odd with Hermione and Malfoy?'

'Apart from the fact that they're working together and they're somehow both still alive?'

Ron shrugged. Harry stared at him for a moment. 'You're not jealous *of him* now, are you?'

'I'm not jealous!' Ron hissed, blushing madly, as McGonagall told them sharply to shut up. 'It just... doesn't look right. I'm worried.'

'Firstly, Hermione knows how to defend herself. Secondly, Malfoy won't get a toe out of line and risk offending Ginny. Relax.'

The mention of Ginny took Ron's mind off Hermione for a moment. 'Wish I knew what's going on between them. Even Dean's getting upset.'

'We'll find out. Hermione's working on it, isn't she?' Harry reminded him. 'If you so much as suggest she's not hating every second of it, she'll--'

'But she isn't!'

'Did you want her to cry? Of course she's making the best of it, Blaise is there with her!'

'And you think that makes it better?!'

Harry laughed.

He and Ron spent the next class insulting McGonagall and their extra load of homework.

Dumbledore had announced that he would be joining them for the night's rehearsal. They wanted to show him their progress in the Masquerade sequence, but Blaise thought it more prudent to warm up with easier scenes beforehand. The headmaster, smiling lightly, went from one group to the other, nodding in appreciation. Most people liked to see him there. He had the gift of calming them down.

'*Don't take me back there,*' Hermione pleaded with Malfoy as Snape observed them with an unreadable face. '*He'll kill me!*'

A short distance from them, 'Firmin' and 'André' congratulated each other on 'a splendid party'. Meanwhile, Ron, as M. Reyer, attempted to instruct Neville on how to sing an aria. Nott interrupted him, showing the premises to an imaginary Firmin and André.

Ron exchanged displeased glances with him. '*M. Lefèvre, we are rehearsing.*'

'*My apologies, M. Reyer. Proceed, proceed...*'

'*Thank you, Monsieur.*' Ron replied, a tad sardonically. Then, waving hugely at Neville, '*Sad to return...*'

'*M. Reyer, our chief repetiteur. Rather a tyrant, I'm afraid.*' Nott waggled his eyebrows at those around him.

Harry and Seamus tried to assure McGonagall and Ginny that La Carlotta would be back. In response, McGonagall waved a letter in their faces '*From the Opera Ghost.*'

'*Madame, who is the understudy for this role?*' Seamus asked.

'*There's no understudy, Monsieur the production is new,*' Ron shouted, from a distance.

'*Christine Daaé could sing it, sir,*' Ginny suggested timidly.

'*A chorus girl?*' Harry sneered.

Shortly afterwards, both he and Seamus were taskless, and they turned to see that Snape and Hermione were talking to Dumbledore. Or... arguing with him. Hermione was red to her eyelashes. Snape was livid. Dumbledore seemed to be holding back laughter. Harry and Seamus exchanged glances and drew closer.

'No. No. No.'

'But, Severus...'

'No.'

'It's just...'

'No.'

'But it's only...'

'No!' Snape rounded on him.

'Severus, it has to be done!'

'Here's a novel idea--let's pretend!' Snape barked.

'You could at least try...'

'No!'

Utterly confused, Harry and Seamus approached the arguing trio, who were now the centre of attentions.

'What's going on?' Harry whispered. Hermione, pink cheeks contrasting with her pale face, jumped at the sound of his voice.

'Professor Snape isn't keen on our next sequence,' she explained carefully.

'Why not?'

'Because I'm not about to kiss a child, Potter, that's why,' Snape loudly replied. Seamus made a gagging sound behind him, but Harry didn't hear it.

'What?'

'The Phantom and Christine have to kiss,' Hermione elaborated. 'And Professor Snape... doesn't want to do it.'

'Because you're so very comfortable with the thought, aren't you, Miss Granger?' Snape bit out, sounding amusingly childlike.

'Very well, Severus, do what you think is best,' Dumbledore relented. 'But I still think you could just try it once to see how it goes... perhaps in private?'

Harry's jaw dropped, and he glowered at Dumbledore with a ferocity he had never used with the headmaster.

Snape seemed to be addressing a madman. 'Headmaster. She's a teenager.'

'She's more mature than most people I know. Surely you don't think she would be scarred?'

'Perhaps not, but / might.'

'What's going on?' Ron had arrived. 'Everyone's staring.'

'Professor Snape won't kiss Hermione,' Seamus informed him, enjoying the scene immensely.

Ron blinked twice. '... May I take Professor Snape's side on this?'

'And even a Weasley sees sense before you do,' Snape gritted out at the headmaster, who cleared his throat loudly.

'There's no need to argue over this. It is up to Professor Snape and Miss Granger to decide how they want to do this, and if--'

Hermione addressed Snape very softly. 'Professor, it *is* rather awkward, but if it's the best for the project...'

'Miss Granger,' Snape calmly cut her off.

'Yes, Professor?'

'Shut up.'

'Ahem,' Dumbledore continued as she blushed crimson and Snape earned himself a mass glare from her friends. 'I confess I would have liked to see the effect, particularly as done by two of the most *mature* people in this room, who would be sure to tell reality from fiction. Alas, they won't do it, and the matter is closed. Professor Snape is right. Our goal is to create an illusion, not a reality. Back to work, everyone. You were doing beautifully, and I'm sorry I interrupted you with the ravings of an old man.' He smiled good-naturedly around and turned to address Snape and Hermione in private.

'You must do your very best for the feint kiss to work, though,' he was saying. Harry was so relieved with the resolution that he almost missed Dumbledore's dismissive, '... and the Bohemians haven't been as particular as you when it comes to key scenes.'

'You try my patience make your choice! Snape barked once they were alone again, marking the end of the matter. Hermione concentrated on her lines.

Watching from a distance, Harry saw Snape bending slightly so that Hermione could reach his neck more easily.

'Pitiful creature of darkness... What kind of life had you known?'

The heavy silence that suddenly filled the Hall told Harry that everyone was following the scene as attentively as he. He wondered if they, too, had trouble breathing.

Just as 'The Phantom' and 'Christine' were about to kiss, Snape slipped behind Hermione, her bushy hair hiding him partially from their sight. His arms were draped around her waist so tenderly, her hand on his neck and their faces so close that no-one could have doubted they were kissing. However, a moment later, they moved at an angle, and Harry could clearly see that only their temples were brushing together.

He wasn't quite ready for the cold, embittered feeling that invaded him once they broke apart. Around him, no-one commented on the scene--perhaps the shock of Snape and Hermione embracing had been too much--and Harry didn't notice that Ron was counting on him to say something funny and ease the tension. Blaise announced that they were done for the day, and even that wasn't enough to tear his gaze from the pair onstage, who seemed to be having a proper look at one another for the first time. Harry couldn't really understand why his ribs weren't cracking with the effort of breathing, but he eventually managed to turn to Ron with something resembling a neutral face, and they began to gather their affairs. Just a few feet away from them, another young man stared at Snape and Hermione with a thoroughly displeased expression.

A Proper Snog

Chapter 9 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry's goal for the day was set from the moment he woke up. Skipping Occlumency. What Snape, Hermione, or anybody else had to say about it mattered very little to him. There were things brewing in his mind that even he didn't want to be aware of.

'Rough night, Potter?' Pansy greeted when he arrived at the Great Hall. Hermione and Malfoy, who had been poring over their Ancient Runes volumes, looked up. 'You must tell Granger to let you rest every now and then.'

Harry yawned, reaching for an empty goblet. The Gryffindors within earshot tensed.

'Forgive me.' Pansy gasped theatrically. 'I'd forgot Granger had the sense to move on to a Slytherin. It's the Weasley girl now, isn't it? Can she live up to your, er, expectations?'

Ginny, sitting far away with her fellow fifth years, was oblivious to the conversation. There were covert glances at wands.

'I might ask you to take her place, Pansy. You look like you need it more than she does,' Harry pointed out dismissively, reaching for toast.

Hermione muttered a scandalised, 'Harry!'

Pansy didn't seem to know what to answer to that, but Malfoy did. He stood and seized her by the elbow, spitting venomously, 'Apologise. Now.'

'Draco...!'

'Dumbledore is watching,' he hissed in fury. 'And we haven't been going through this sacrifice just so that you can ruin it all by insulting a bloody prefect within the earshot of the staff. Apologise!'

'No,' she spat back.

He nodded. 'Okay, then. Good luck surviving Professor Snape. Because I'll make sure he knows none of us were with you on this.'

The prospect of facing Snape without support seemed to frighten her more than Malfoy's stance. Slowly, as though every movement hurt her, Pansy turned to Hermione with a mumbled, dismissive, 'I apologise, Granger. That was rude of me.'

Hermione gave her a curt nod and Pansy motioned to her place, but Malfoy caught her by her robes. After a moment of confusion, her eyes widened. 'You can't!'

He raised an eyebrow. 'I can't?'

'Draco, she didn't even hear me...!' Pansy pleaded. Harry finally realised what was happening now.

'She will,' was Malfoy's only reply.

This apparently humiliated Pansy more than the forced apology to Hermione. She remained rooted to the spot, the blood draining from her face, until Malfoy lost his patience and dragged her resolutely down the table.

They watched from a distance as Ginny looked surprised, then disgusted, and then shocked by Pansy's words. The silence on their end of the table was heavy when Pansy and Malfoy returned. He looked smug. 'So, Granger, is that vocabulary index ready?'

'Well, this was unexpected...' Ron mumbled as the tinkling of goblets and forks on plates returned tentatively around them. Harry nodded mechanically. Pansy looked like the mask of death. He almost pitied the Slytherins who would have to deal with her today.

Many hours later, Harry made a long and torturous job of changing out of his uniform, so that everyone else left the showers before him.

'You run along with them. I'll meet you after Occlumency,' he discreetly told Ron as everyone made their noisy way out of the changing room.

'You sure you'll be all right, mate?' Ron asked, sounding extremely tired and barely concealing his relief.

'Absolutely. Hermione should be looking for someone to go to the library with her. Why don't you go before a Slytherin gets there?'

Ron gave him a half-smile. 'You don't...?'

'Get lost!'

After the longest shower of his life, Harry made his way to the greenhouses. Perhaps if he cleared some of his doubts with Professor Sprout and he didn't completely muck up in Potions, Snape wouldn't kill him for having skipped Occlumency. The fact that he didn't know what potion they would be brewing in their next class was a minor detail. Surely, Sprout had some idea about what Snape usually taught sixth years.

On his way, he met Hagrid, who warned him to steer clear of Sprout's greenhouses.

'Why?'

'Woman's out of 'er mind. Says the 'ouse-elves are misplacin' 'er plants an' whatnot. Rubbish. There're no workers like the elves. Must be tha' time o' the month.' Hagrid grimaced.

Harry grinned. 'Speaking of times of the month, Hagrid, how's Lupin? Haven't heard from him in a while...'

Hagrid looked uncomfortable. 'Look, 'Arry, ye 'now I can't...'

'I just want to know if he's all right!'

Hagrid sighed. 'E's... been busy... fancy a cup o'tea, 'Arry? We can talk 'bout tha' inside,' he invited.

Harry beamed. 'Sure!'

Hagrid's cup of tea kept Harry busy until well after dinner. He was five minutes early for the rehearsal, and as he entered the Great Hall, he peered around the moving furniture, mindful of potentially mad Heads of house. Snape wouldn't have told anyone other than Dumbledore, and perhaps McGonagall--although she would have scolded him for skipping 'precious remedial classes' as soon as he arrived, and she hadn't. Dumbledore, too, had smiled kindly at Harry, looking just a bit more thoughtful than usual.

Harry was surprised. He had imagined Snape would have jumped at the chance to prove that 'the lazy, arrogant whelp' was unworthy of his time. And Harry himself couldn't wait to put an end their lessons.

Where is he? he asked himself. *Late again?* He fleetingly wondered if Snape was ever late for the other years' projects for the sake of their performance.

Ron brought him out of his embittered reverie. 'We were just about to form a search group to rescue you from the dungeons, mate.'

'I wasn't there.'

'Oh?' Ron sounded pleased.

'I took a walk,' Harry clarified simply. 'I met Hagrid.'

'About the...?' Ron now looked very serious. Harry shrugged.

'He didn't want to tell me much. We talked about Lupin, mostly. Your family is okay, though,' he added with a small smile.

He didn't think of his Potions master again until they were told to go to their places. Snape would be sure to go to Hermione as soon as he arrived, a thought that made Harry fume. He might comment on Harry's absence from Occlumency just to see her mad at Harry. That wouldn't do. Harry spotted Hermione receiving instructions from Blaise and sprinted towards her.

'Hermione, want to work with me today?'

'Oh, he noticed my existence!' she replied, not unkindly. 'But Christine and Firmin don't really--'

'I haven't played the Phantom with you, yet. I'm just worried that if we ever need to work together, we won't--'

'Oh, I hope not...' She sounded disheartened.

'Why, thanks,' he grumbled.

'You know what I meant. I hope nothing happens to him...'

'Didn't know you cared so much.' He eyed her carefully, rather displeased with the inflection in her voice.

'I just don't want him to--you know. Would you want--?' She widened her eyes almost comically and lowered her voice. 'Harry, he's really not that bad...'

'But I'm better, I hope,' he joked. She put an arm over his shoulder with a laugh and led him to a quieter spot, not before promising to work with Malfoy later on.

In spite of the general good work, the highlight of the night was Hermione's duet with Malfoy. Because she was still recovering from her recent illness, Blaise had instructed Malfoy to lower his voice to her level, just so that they could have an idea of what the end result would be. Malfoy ranted loudly about being asked to sing poorly and raved that this was an insult. Blaise finally calmed him down by reminding him that he would have the chance to show off his vocal cords later.

Harry only left Hermione's side once he was sure that she would make a beeline for Malfoy. Snape still hadn't arrived. Harry sulked inwardly, hating the other years. Onstage, Hermione and Malfoy were already enacting the love scene. It was strangely amusing to see Malfoy being gentle and reassuring towards Hermione. She, by the way, looked much more embarrassed around Malfoy than Harry had ever seen her around Snape.

'We're trying to get some work done while these two get sappy,' Ron called. 'Want to join us?' Harry retrieved his script and gladly joined them.

'And if he has to kill a thousand men...' Hermione's voice reached them.

'Care to take over the Phantom's lines, Harry?' Blaise asked.

'Sure.'

'Good. Start with his letter in Scene Eight, then.'

'The Phantom of the Opera will kill, and kill again!' Hermione's eyes widened madly.

'There is no Phantom of the Opera...' Malfoy countered in desperation.

Harry read out Firmin's part of the letter and then cleared his throat to read the Phantom's bit in a different tone.

'In the new production of 'Il Muto', you will cast Carlotta as the Pageboy...' Harry sneered at Pansy, whose eyes were fixed on the stage, where Hermione was going on about the Phantom's voice filling her spirit *'with a strange sweet sound'*. Harry froze at the words.

'Harry? Pansy? Do you mind?!' Blaise said loudly. They snapped back to reality, glaring at each other, and then at Blaise. Their director's unusual irritation brought a smile to Ron's lips.

'The role which Miss Daae plays calls for charm and appeal.' Harry smiled devilishly at Pansy, casting a delighted glance towards Hermione. *'The role of the Pageboy is silent--which makes my casting, in a word, ideal.'*

'Yet in his eyes, all the sadness of the world...' Hermione sang. Harry again had to be called to attention.

'I shall watch the performance from my normal seat in Box Five, which will be kept empty for me.' Harry looked firmly at Seamus.

Meanwhile, Malfoy had finally made the transition to a romantic mood. *'I'm here, nothing can harm you,'* he promised.

'Should these commands be ignored...' Harry said smoothly in a rather passable imitation of Snape's tone.

'Say you love me, every waking moment, turn my head...' Hermione pleaded.

'A disaster beyond your imagination will occur,' Harry continued, more pleasantly still, only then regaining Firmin's usual voice. *'I remain, gentlemen, your obedient servant...'*

'The Vicomte--her lover!' Pansy pointed out angrily.

'Ron, would you take over Raoul's lines for a moment?' Blaise asked quietly, deeply concentrated. Ron picked up his own script, not bothering to answer him.

'Then say you share with me, one love, one lifetime...' Draco demanded.

'O traditori!' Pansy shouted.

'Miss Daaé will be playing the Pageboy--the silent role,' Harry assured her.

'Say you love me...' Hermione asked, breaking eye contact with Malfoy and being immediately told off for it.

'Love me--that's all I ask of you...' they sang in unison.

'Abbandonata! Desederata! O, sventurata!'

Ron stared at the stage, looking displeased. 'Well, that's bollocks...' He mouthed the last word so that McGonagall wouldn't hear him.

Ginny followed his gaze. 'What's the matter?'

At her brisk words, all eyes turned to the romantic leads. Blaise looked from them to the script. 'Why didn't you kiss?'

Malfoy and Hermione moved as one to face him.

'Because we don't need to...?' Malfoy asked sardonically. Harry cast a glance at Hermione's crimson face and almost pitied her.

'Draco, that's the kissing scene,' Blaise retorted, beginning to lose his temper.

'Which we're rehearsing, not acting out for real,' Malfoy elaborated.

'Blaise, really, we'd really rather--'

'--kiss Blast-Ended Skrewts.' Malfoy finished for her. She instinctively nodded.

Blaise had a long, harsh look at them. 'We don't have time for tantrums, nor elaborate gimmicks. The seamstresses need to have an idea about your movements, we need to figure out the lights, and you two need to be professional about this. Do it.'

'Blaise...!'

'Just do it,' he repeated coldly. Harry was reminded, for the first time in weeks, that Blaise, too, was a Slytherin.

'Well, they're not teacher and student, at least,' Ginny muttered as the rest of them waited with bated breaths. Ron glared at her, his mood matching Blaise's.

Malfoy and Hermione regained their positions, fighting bravely to hold each other's gaze. As the last line faded out of their lips, Hermione took a deep breath and stepped closer. Malfoy looked paler than usual as his hand inched towards her chin and he leaned in ever so slightly. Harry hadn't noticed until then how much shorter she was than he. Even at a distance, he could see their eyes widening as their mouths moved closer. The kiss was the lightest, briefest of touches, dampened somewhat by their tense limbs. It was just enough for the room to explode in whistles and catcalls. Raising his voice above the others, Blaise pronounced the rehearsal over for the night. The thought of asking for a reprise crossed Harry's mind rather suicidally.

In spite of the loud, giggling flurry around them, Malfoy and Hermione remained rooted to the spot and to each other's gaze, attempting to string together a few muttered phrases that nobody really cared to hear.

'Your Phantom was excellent tonight, Harry.' Blaise approached him. 'Have you been working on the rest? How's the singing going?'

'You know I'm not much of a singer. I worked a bit with Hermione tonight, but that's it.'

'Don't fret, there's time,' Blaise said pensively.

'Blaise,' Harry replied firmly. Blaise did a double take. 'I'm not playing the Phantom.'

'I just want you to be ready, in case... Professor Snape didn't come today, and I need to be sure that we have a lead,' Blaise explained just as firmly.

Harry hadn't given the man much thought during the duet, but he had thought, or hoped, that he would eventually come in, late as usual, perhaps for a quick word with Dumbledore. A glance at the chaos around him proved him wrong. Dumbledore and McGonagall were indeed talking, but to one another.

'... and if he gives up at the last minute...' Blaise was saying. Harry nodded mechanically. 'You and Hermione should work together more often.' The flash of Hermione and Snape's kissing scene made Harry nod more fervently.

'Yeah, we should. Will you excuse me for a moment, Blaise?' He ran to Hermione, who was just stepping offstage.

'And how does the Classics' Official Kisser feel about another unforgettable performance?'

She groaned. 'It was a lot easier with Professor Snape.'

Harry frowned. 'That's a bit of information that I really didn't need.'

Hermione made an indignant sound and changed the subject. 'How did Occlumency go, by the way? Where is he?'

'It went... fine. Fine. But he didn't show up for the rehearsal.'

'No? Why not?' Hermione looked around more attentively. 'Did he tell you?'

'No,' he answered honestly.

'I hope everything is all right,' she said thoughtfully. 'Let me go talk to Blaise...'

Only then, watching Hermione's retreating back, did it hit Harry. Heart pounding in his chest, he dashed towards Dumbledore and McGonagall, who were still talking gravely.

'Where's Snape?' he blurted out.

'Potter!' a shocked McGonagall scolded him. Harry simply turned to Dumbledore.

'He's not in the school, is he?'

McGonagall turned a very stern face to him. 'Professor Snape is tending to personal affairs, Mr Potter. His whereabouts are his concern alone.'

'He's with the Death Eaters, isn't he?' Harry said, lowering his voice at the last moment. 'He is, isn't he? He never skips the rehearsal, no matter how late he is, he always has to watch for his precious Slytherins, but he's not here tonight--because he's not in Hogwarts, is he?' He paused for a quick breath. 'Is he all right? Where is he?'

McGonagall wanted to reply, but Dumbledore spoke first. 'No, Harry, he's not. He will hopefully be back soon enough. As for your other questions, well, I'm afraid I don't know the answer myself.'

A sudden dizziness washed over Harry. 'Should he be back by now?' Dumbledore nodded gravely.

McGonagall then addressed him. 'You should go to bed, Potter. If you're so worried, we'll let you know when Professor Snape arrives.'

'No...' Harry muttered. 'No need. I was just wondering...'

'Sleep well, Harry.' Dumbledore smiled faintly. 'It's very nice of you to take an interest in Professor Snape's safety. But I'm sure there are no reasons for concern.'

Harry nodded blankly and bade them goodnight. Feeling rather unwell, he rejoined Ron and Hermione, who were arguing up the stairs. She had found out that it had been his comment that had prompted the kiss.

'Of course the ever-unattentive Ronald Weasley had to pay attention at that exact time. Do you know how embarrassing it was?'

'It's my fault that you can't get over yourselves? I don't like to work with Parkinson either, but we still do it--for the sake of the performance!'

'Yeah, you're really interested in the performance...!'

'You used to be!' Ron shouted. 'Before your boyfriend stopped going along with your every whim!'

Harry escaped to the dormitory as soon as he could. He sat by the window, observing the moonlit grounds in silence, half expecting to spot a dark figure slinking towards the castle. But he saw only Hagrid's massive shadow entering his hut, Mrs Norris catching a short break before going back to her patrol and the giant squid rushing up for a glimpse of the moon before another dive.

He now felt slightly guilty about skipping Occlumency. Had Snape been late for his own meeting because he had been waiting for Harry? Had he wanted to tell Harry that he would be gone for the night?

'No,' he admitted to himself. 'He'd have told Hermione. She's the only Gryffindor in his mind.'

He was still lost in thought when Ron entered the room, and there he remained long after Ron's offended grumbling had faded in his deep sleep. He sat there, looking out for any movement outside, dangerously close to being sick with worry over someone unworthy of his concern.

'But his voice filled my spirit with a strange, sweet sound...' The walls seemed to echo. Perhaps Hermione was still working?

He rested his head on his arms and watched Fang running around Hagrid's hut. It reminded him of Sirius, Padfoot, jumping around and enjoying his last shreds of freedom when he had accompanied Harry and the others to the station over a year before. He sighed as a different sort of guilt rose inside of him.

And yet, nothing came.

Heartache

Chapter 10 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

'Harry, wake up.'

He responded by holding the pillow more tightly. Somebody squeezed his shoulder and rocked him softly. 'Wake up, mate!'

'Go away,' he snapped sleepily. In return, Ron shouted in his ear.

'There are two Quidditch teams downstairs planning your painful murder. Wake up!'

Harry groggily hoisted himself up on his elbows. 'I have a headache.'

'... and your clothes on. Half the work's done,' Ron smirked.

Harry had a bleary look at himself. He was all rumpled school robes and fierce yawns. 'Couldn't sleep.' He ground his head down on the mattress.

'There's no time to make up for that now,' Ron informed him just as he took hold of one of Harry's arms and heaved. Harry pushed himself back down.

'Breakfast,' he grumbled.

'You missed it. Come on.'

That woke him up completely. He sprang to his knees and looked at Ron. 'Missed breakfast?'

Mistaking his reaction for hunger, Ron smirked again, reaching for a tray. 'I brought you this. I thought you might be hungry after skipping dinner, too--be quick.'

Harry looked at the tray with a moan. 'I'm not really hungry--' he began, his mind on Snape and on whether he had shown up for breakfast.

'Tough. You'll have to drink the milk, at least.' Ron looked rather like his mother when he was cross.

'Harry heaved a deep sigh. 'I really--'

'You won't be falling off that broom as long as I'm here,' Ron snapped. 'I won't have you fainting half the time like the other one, okay?'

Harry's eyes widened. 'Has anything happened to Hermione?'

'She's downstairs, feeling dizzy,' Ron grumbled. 'Nearly toppled over Malfoy after breakfast.'

'Is she okay?!'

'Yeah. The teachers are fawning over her.' Ron hopped off the bed. 'Now... you'll need underwear. And... you're already dressed... another pair of shoes?' He looked at Harry questioningly. 'Drink that milk!'

Harry grinned from behind the briefs that had landed squarely on his face.

'I just need another minute. You can go back downstairs.'

Ron waited to make sure he picked up the glass and then made his way across the room. He was halfway out when Harry finally asked, 'Did you see Snape at breakfast?'

'Couldn't miss him. He was the first teacher to reach Hermione,' he shouted. 'Hurry up!'

Not for the first time, Harry was grateful that his love of Quidditch had the knack to take his mind off everything else, at least whilst sitting on his broom. He circled his team mates gleefully while they waited for those who were late.

'Where's Ginny?' Ron asked, his head turning in every direction.

'I thought she was here,' Harry answered from behind Crabbe, who nodded negatively as well.

'She's late,' Malfoy commented, playing with the Quaffle.

'Oh, really?' Ron replied sardonically.

Malfoy's sigh could be heard even in the windy pitch. 'She's sorting something out and she doesn't know how long she'll be. I suggest we start without her.'

'And you know that because...?'

'... she told me,' was the curt answer.

'Why you instead of us?!'

Harry, sensing danger, and lacking better options, signalled for Crabbe to be at the ready in case one of them got thrown off his broom. Crabbe eyed him suspiciously, but finally nodded, gesturing for Goyle to be attentive.

'I think it was because when she tried to tell you, you were too busy looking at Granger to listen to her.' Malfoy's face had turned stony.

Madam Hooch's whistle drilled into their eardrums. She was across the pitch, discussing strategies with the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws while they practised, but her eyesight could apparently overcome the distance. 'Don't make me go over there!'

Familiar with her temper, Ron and Malfoy calmed down somewhat. Ginny arrived shortly after, accompanied by Hermione and Blaise, who sat together in one of the Slytherin stands.

'Everything all right, Ginny?' Harry shouted when she hopped on a broom and spiralled around without so much as a 'Hi.'

'Fine!' She lost her balance and nearly fell on a Hufflepuff who had wandered their way.

Harry shrugged.

When she finally approached them for some proper practice, Ron pulled her aside. 'Where the hell were you?'

'Leave me alone.'

'Why didn't you tell us you were going to be late?'

'I told Draco! Didn't he tell you?' She glowered at Malfoy, who gestured as though to say, 'Keep me out of this...'

Ron blinked. 'He's "Draco" now?'

Ginny pursed her lips, only then realising she had slipped.

'I've been "Draco" for a few years now, actually. Since before I was born, I think,' Malfoy said dismissively.

Ron stared at Ginny, who snapped at him, 'We're working together Ron. Why shouldn't we be civil?'

Ron, to whom the concept of being civil to a Malfoy was clearly alien, opened and closed his mouth like a fish, regaining his place by the hoops.

'By the way,' Ginny raised her voice sarcastically, 'you'll want to know that I won't be rehearsing tomorrow.'

'Why not?'

'Because Snape thinks Sunday afternoons are great for detentions!'

Harry froze mid-somersault. 'Snape?'

She breathed in deeply. 'I had an essay due yesterday, but I couldn't deliver it because the dear professor was nowhere to be found. And apparently, everybody except him knows that he only accepts homework that is delivered in person because he said I should have left it in his office anyway--and he took twenty points from both our houses, so this really is a great day for me. I wish he were dead.'

By now, most Slytherins were used to see the Gryffindors lose them points, so the customary groans were discreet. Harry smiled in spite of himself. Snape was apparently in good shape.

'Potter, are you okay?' Malfoy's voice reached him through his relieved reverie.

Harry grinned. 'Never better. Now, about that Snitch...!'

It was Ginny's turn to look at him. 'Harry, did you hear me?'

'Sure! Which part?'

'You have Remedial Potions on Monday. Snape said you'd know why.'

'Did he?' Harry said distractedly. 'Thanks!' He sprinted after the Snitch.

'He's been kind of random, lately,' Ron commented. The others nodded. Malfoy was readying to go after Harry when Ginny pulled at his hood. 'We need to talk.'

'Malfoy, are you coming?!'

By the time they had gathered again in the Great Hall for the afternoon's rehearsal, Harry's joy had dimmed somewhat. He had stood up Snape, and the man wasn't likely to be in a good mood. He was musing over what he could do to convince Snape not to murder him over lunch when Ron snapped, 'Would you stop that?'

'What?' he mumbled through his mouthful of mashed potato.

'You've been humming *Music of the Night* all day long,' Hermione clarified.

Harry blinked, turning on Ron. 'What?! If you can wake me up every day with your squeaks about proper Italian pronunciation, I can hum a song.'

'I don't squeak, I enunciate,' Ron retorted with a scowl. 'And that song's driving me insane.'

'I think it's lovely,' Hermione commented dreamily.

'Harry!'

'Sorry...!' Harry stuffed his mouth again. Hermione picked up his humming where he had let off.

'Hermione!'

'What?' she asked innocently. 'We're rehearsing, M. Lefèvre...'

To their right, Ginny and Dean were picking at their food sullenly, Seamus losing hope of improving their mood. A short distance to their left, Malfoy and Pansy bickered loudly. Snape's malevolent glare enveloped them all. In stark contrast, upon catching Harry's eye, Hagrid waved friendly from the staff table. Harry attacked the pudding with gusto. Hogwarts was back to normal.

Harry and Hermione had hoped for a free hour to work together. Snape called Hermione to him so swiftly that Harry followed her before he even realised what he was doing. Snarking about Miss Granger's varied group of bodyguards and about Harry's sudden dedication to his part ('Your part,' Harry corrected him), Snape finally agreed to have a look at their progress.

'Potter,' he eventually interrupted them, mid-*Music of the Night*. 'I'm sure you think of me every time words like "darkness" and "open up your mind" are uttered, but you really should be looking at Miss Granger here.'

Considering the man's eyes barely left Hermione at all, Harry was surprised Snape even noticed where he was looking. When he embraced Hermione tenderly for the last bars, she was quivering with suppressed laughter and Snape's scowl had deepened.

'Don't embrace,' he wearily recommended as they grinned involuntarily. 'You're not singing about physical contact.'

They were left alone for longer than they had expected. On the one occasion where Hermione considered going to Malfoy, he had been rowing loudly with Pansy. According to Neville, they had been serenely working on a sequence when she went up to Malfoy and snapped at him for no apparent reason. McGonagall eventually sent them out the room with strict instructions to only come back once ready to behave properly. When they returned, a quick look at their faces told everyone that they were best left alone.

'Everything going smoothly over here?' Blaise asked with a deep sigh. Hermione smiled at him. 'These two...' he grumbled in an unusual show of temper. 'The next diva in training will be drowned before questioning.'

'How about the others? How are they doing?'

'Fine, if we forget about the fact that we've lost our *prima donna* and the romantic lead.'

Hermione pinched his cheek and Snape cleared his throat. Blaise immediately regained his composure.

'Anyway, we need you back, Harry. Are you done?'

'Of course he is,' Snape replied before Harry could get a word in. 'Miss Granger and I, too, need to work.'

Rather unwillingly, Harry found himself following Blaise towards Seamus, Hermione's reassuring smile lost behind his back.

When they arrived at the pitch, Malfoy was already there, hammering a Bludger against the stands as though his life depended on it. Only Ginny went up to him while the teams retrieved the other balls and their brooms from the sheds. Harry spotted Hermione and Blaise, sitting on the grass and going through rolls of parchment. She waved.

Ginny had somehow convinced Malfoy to join them for practice.

'You know, it's all your fault that she's acting like this,' they heard her say. As a retort, he swore creatively.

Ron, who was late due to an earlier argument with Hermione, peered in confusion over Harry's shoulder, his jumper still over his nose. 'Ah,' he said, answering his own unspoken question.

Although he was looking in the same direction as his team mates, Harry was completely lost in contemplation of his most recent dream. Apparently, his subconscious didn't particularly care that Snape's tongue was vicious as long as his mouth was otherwise occupied. Just the thought of a particular sequence made him blush self-consciously. He didn't know what was going on with him.

'Don't you lot have anything to do?' Malfoy snapped at the on-lookers. Ron glared at him and shot a warning look at Ginny, who lifted up her chin defiantly.

Harry didn't live up to his abilities that morning. His mind kept drifting. He was vaguely aware that Ron and Ginny had argued all the way back to the castle, but he couldn't bring himself to care, as the nature of his recent obsession with Snape began to truly sink in. The self-conscious flushing slowly developed into an acid, cold unease.

'I'm doomed,' he confided to the Bloody Baron when they passed him on their way to lunch.

Monday arrived, and with it, Harry's rescheduled Occlumency lesson--which he again chose to skip. In light of his recent epiphany, it wasn't so much a whim, rather a matter of personal survival.

Having engaged Ron and Neville's aid in keeping Hermione away from Snape during the rehearsal, he scanned their usual spot for signs of her. It was Ron's groan that signalled her presence. She and Blaise stood against the wall, so deep in conversation that they didn't hear the headmaster calling for everyone's attention.

'I would like to remind the sixth years that their performances are due in less than two months and that any casting for extras should take place as soon as possible. Again, I beg of you not to approach seventh years, as they should have their hands full with their NEWT levels.' The seventh years nodded fervently.

Malfoy shifted in his seat to poke Blaise's back with his wand. Blaise looked down with a scowl.

'What the hell...?' He caught himself when Malfoy's head tilted towards the headmaster. Hermione put on an attentive air.

'Forgive this intrusive old man, but I'm rather curious about your special effects,' Dumbledore addressed Ron, who cleared his throat and answered firmly.

'According to my brothers, our effects are almost ready. They might need to come in to have a look at the Phantom's lair, though.' Snape scowled, and Ron turned to him, whilst Harry trained his eyes on his own lap. 'They would like to adapt their work to yours, Professor, considering all the cues will come from you, after all.'

'Let me know when they intend to come. A bit of preparation might be in order before we deal with the Knights of Apocalypse again,' Snape deadpanned. Ron glowered at him.

'I already intended to, sir.'

'They also need a meeting with the Bohemians. They found your material a bit vague, and they say they need clearer direction on some sequences.' There were scattered manifestations of offence from the Bohemians, who thought they had submitted an exemplary synopsis and script for examination. 'And they need a really quick answer about the colours you want for your explosions.'

'Explosions?!' Professor Sprout interrupted, slightly alarmed.

Flitwick swiftly let her know that Ron was just talking about a set of fireworks, loud, but harmless. 'We tried it yesterday with a few charms, and the effect was lovely.' He beamed proudly at his house. 'Such a pity you couldn't be there to see it.'

Harry repressed a snort, recalling that the closest thing to one such compliment that Snape had ever paid the Classics had been his offhanded praise of Hermione's rendition of *Think of Me* the night before.

Sprout grumbled something about reorganising the greenhouses in response to Flitwick. Unseen by Harry, Malfoy craned his neck to glare at Blaise and Hermione, who had once again focused on one another. Ron caught this and cast him a glance heavy with suspicions before turning his attention back to the Bohemians' upcoming meeting with his brothers.

'Just show up whenever you have the time, and we can talk this over.' Lisa Turpin winked at him. Blushing furiously, Ron sank back on the bench amidst a sea of catcalls.

'Let's take Hermione out of here,' Harry suggested, eyes narrowed at the ferocious gaze Snape had fastened on her and Blaise. Ron immediately sat up, grateful for a suggestion that both allowed him to escape the scrutiny and break up the pair. Unexpectedly, Hermione didn't resist them in the least. Ron fumed quietly at the light kiss Blaise laid on her cheek when she told him she would see him for lunch. Snape's glare, Harry noted, didn't leave them until they were out of the room.

Ron ranted all morning about Hermione and Blaise's 'ridiculous' relationship. Harry, who hoped fervently that they never broke up, nodded mechanically every now and then.

'Parkinson should have been Christine,' he muttered to himself when they were back in the Great Hall for lunch.

'Exactly,' Ron exclaimed. 'Hermione's only confused because she has to work so closely with Zabini. Take Ginny, for example. If Hermione had been Meg--'

'... she might have fallen for Malfoy?'

Ron shuddered.

'Has it occurred to you that Hermione might actually like Blaise?' Harry mumbled absently. This was usually the bit where Ron tuned out of the conversation.

'Where's the ferret, by the way?' Ron enquired, predictably changing the subject.

'Out. But Ginny's over there,' Harry pointed at her. She and Dean were apparently having a serious conversation. Ron looked at them with a sigh. 'So...!' Harry began, in a lighter tone. 'Is there anything you need to tell me about the Ravenclaws?'

Ron choked on his pumpkin juice. 'What're you talking about?'

'Nothing.' Harry shrugged. 'I'm just surprised to see the Ravenclaws swooning at the sight of you. Turpin looked like you'd transfigured her into a puddle of drool.' Ron turned scarlet. Harry put on a very serious face. 'Luna'll be jealous.'

'Luna?'

'Girl's been nursing a crush for over a year and you haven't noticed?'

Ron seemed to be hoping that the floor opened up under him. It was Neville's arrival that saved him. 'Have you seen Pansy? She has my script...'

'Neville, please tell me that you've memorised your lines.' Blaise groaned from their right. Neville's flush could have competed with Ron's.

'I... I just need to have another look at this one sequence...' he said tentatively. With a disdainful look that the Slytherins probably learned from birth, Blaise lent him his own script, and Harry again turned to Ron.

'That Ravenclaw Beater's been staring,' he murmured. Ron stuffed an entire croissant in Harry's mouth to shut him up. He was coughing up the last crumbs when Malfoy arrived in his customary bad mood. One of his year mates asked him something and earned himself a glower that could curdle milk.

Hermione arrived shortly after with another rose securely tucked in a book. She was quiet, only sighing at the never-ending chatter around her. Their din died down abruptly when the food arrived. Or perhaps it only looked like that to Harry, who had lost track of what everyone was saying as soon as Snape arrived, seconds after Hermione, and he, too, deep in thought. Just as Harry considered asking Hermione if Snape had delayed her, she rose to sit beside Blaise.

'Why, that was polite...' Ron grumbled, stabbing his steak.

As the end of the afternoon approached, Harry began to worry about Occlumency. Both Quidditch teams had overheard Ginny giving him Snape's message, and his biggest quibble with his mates had always been that they all seemed much more observant when it came to *his* private life than their own. Inviting Ron for a surprise visit to Hagrid was no use. Hermione would never have it.

'I can have Malfoy give me a beating--he won't mind me missing an appointment,' he mused, climbing the stairs that led to the common room.

'I don't think that is very sensible,' one of the portraits wisely pointed out.

Ironically, help came from Hermione. Just as he reached the Fat Lady, it flung sideways to let her pass, clutching an abnormally large pile of books. Harry gaped at her. 'Are you trying to kill yourself?'

She craned her neck around the pile, which shook alarmingly. '... help?'

'To the library, I presume?' he asked, helping himself to an armful of volumes. They walked quietly. After considering several ways of addressing her melancholy face, he opted for a direct approach. 'Do you want to talk?'

'Why can't I do anything right?' she blurted out shakily. Harry immediately put down his set of books, earning an immediate reproach from Madam Pince ('I hope you don't intend to leave them there!') and led Hermione to one of the windows, thanking Merlin for the almost empty premises.

'What's wrong? Is it your schoolwork?'

She heaved the deepest sigh, her hands clasped around her nose. 'It will be, eventually.'

Harry furrowed his brow. 'But right now...? Hermione, talk to me...!'

She took a deep breath, as though readying herself for a big confession. 'Malfoy and Parkinson broke up, you know? That's why they're both in such a foul mood.'

Harry blinked in confusion. 'How'd you know?'

'They weren't very discreet,' she pointed out. 'When Ron finds out and links this to Ginny...'

'She'll be in trouble,' Harry finished for her. 'But we were talking about you.'

'... Blaise and I... everything is going so badly... We argue all the time now, and I really don't think this is worth it, but Blaise always wants to give it another try, and I don't have the heart to tell him not to... and then there's Malfoy...'

'What about him?'

'He and Blaise argue all the time, too. All the time! Most of the time, I don't even know what they're rowing about, but... Blaise sounds like he's jealous of him, and I think Ginny...'

That confused Harry even further. 'What does Ginny have to do with it?'

'She... she gives me these strange looks, every time I speak to Malfoy, and she didn't do this before, she didn't!' she insisted frantically.

'She's been spending loads of time with us, and I haven't noticed her treating you differently at all,' Harry said firmly.

'She's *looking* at me differently, and that's enough!' Hermione snapped.

'And is that why you're so teary?!'

Hermione quieted down somewhat. 'Not exactly... she'll eventually see that... she's wrong about me. It's just... I can't stand this. Everyone around me... it looks like everyone is suddenly mad at me, and I can't... I don't think I deserve this, and I don't know how to change it...!'

'I'm not mad at you,' Harry lied, ignoring his murderous inner voice.

'I know,' she conceded with a sad smile. 'But Ron is, and Ginny, and Blaise, and Malfoy... well, he's always hated me, anyway, but it's going to ruin our work, and then the teachers will be mad at me, and... It's lonely...'

Harry was genuinely uneasy with the look on her face now. He knew only too well what it was to feel that way. 'You know Ron. He adores you. He's just... he's just scared that you're going to get hurt.' Hermione silenced a snuffle. 'And the rest... just talk to our teachers and forget about the group work. It was an experiment gone wrong, is all. Then you won't have to deal with him, and neither Blaise nor Ginny will be mad at you--if she's mad at all.'

'I don't think that'll be enough to sort things out with Blaise...'

'It's worth a try.'

'I... have a crush,' she muttered almost inaudibly. 'On someone who is not Blaise.'

A bitter coldness crept inside of Harry. 'S-Sorry?'

'I think I... It's the wrongest person imaginable, and I can't tell anyone about it and I have to see him every day, and it kills me--it kills me...!'

'Why can't you...?'

'I can't.' She shook her head vigorously. 'I just can't.'

They sat in silence for a long moment. Then she whispered, glancing around, 'Shouldn't you be going to Professor Snape?'

'I'd rather stay here with you,' he admitted with a small smile. She looked, for a second, like she was considering telling him off. 'I'll reschedule it with Snape,' he finally added. 'It won't kill him. And you need me more than he does,' he pointed out in all honesty.

Her serious, quiet, 'Thank you,' was scarier than any scolding.

After another short pause, he raised his eyes to hers. 'If it makes you feel better, I can see perfectly well why Blaise is so in love with you.'

She gulped and said nothing. They sat in silence for a long time until Madam Pince came to berate them loudly for their disrespect towards the number of unique, old books that they had scattered around themselves, as well as for their lack of interest in the library's closing time. They had to find themselves another quiet spot, this time in order to brace themselves for the rehearsal that loomed ahead. So absorbed were they that they didn't realise that two Slytherins had left just before they did: one of them had listened to every word from between two book rows. The other, Pansy, watching from further away, had caught very little of the conversation, but had observed their closeness with a calculistic mindset.

The unusually sunny morning found both Harry and Hermione in a much better mood. According to her, Snape had made no reference to Harry's absence during the rehearsal, and Harry's time with Seamus and 'the Opera's crew' had been much more fun than he had anticipated. It took their impending Potions class to lower Harry's spirits. He was halfway down the stairs when he actually considered dashing back upstairs. He could almost *feel* fear gripping his insides.

'You can't skip Potions forever just to avoid a confrontation, Harry,' Hermione said sensibly, urging him on. Rather against his will, Harry took his place, fear subtly giving way to unease of a different sort as his eyes adapted to the shadowy room and spotted Snape rising from his chair to address them.

Even under Harry's constant scrutiny, Snape somehow managed to slip behind him sometime during the class, so silently that Harry only noticed it when the man's hands were clasped on either side of his cauldron and his mouth was inches from Harry's ear.

'That has to be the most interesting shade of green I've ever happened upon. Did you add the dragon claw after the powdered moonstone?' he asked loudly, following the question with a whispered one meant for Harry's ears alone. 'Do you by any chance believe that I exist solely to wait on you hand and foot, Potter?'

Clearing his throat to make sure his voice didn't waver, Harry answered both questions at the same time. 'No, sir.'

Snape leaned in, and his hand slipped over Harry's, momentarily blocking his capacity of thought. 'It's the second time I wait in vain, Potter. Believe me; a third try is not advisable.' All that his classmates heard was an audible, 'And why, may I ask, since the rules clearly specified that you should?'

'I'm sorry... sir. I had a--' Harry struggled to answer, through the growing awareness of the heat that Snape's presence brought on his back.

'I. Don't. Care.' Snape clipped out almost soundlessly. 'Tonight, in my office. The alternative is to go to the headmaster and explain clearly why you can't be bothered with a lesson that only you need.' Loudly, he added, 'This can't happen again, Potter. Mistakes of this sort have no place in a NEWT class.'

'No, sir.'

'Detention. Tonight, at seven.'

'Yes, sir.'

Snape moved on to the neighbouring cauldron. Harry didn't quite know whose it was. He felt rather groggy. He needed fresh air. And water. And the loo. Urgently.

That night, at seven, having explained to a raging Ron that it was an Occlumency lesson, not detention, he stood outside Snape's office, looking more cool and collected than he had been in months.

'Wand out,' was the greeting he received. Snape, leaning on the desk with a stony expression, didn't bother move more than his wand arm. Harry had a fleeting sense of impending doom. He took a deep breath and held his wand at the ready.

'*Legilimens.*'

The word seemed to glide towards him like the tide, making the room swim as the spell approached Harry, crashing in his ears and hurling a thousand memories to the forefront of his mind. They fought for supremacy, but Harry instinctively knew that Snape was looking for something in particular. He had never flipped through his memories so swiftly. The gaudy whirlpool almost made Harry lose his balance.

But one memory came that Snape didn't dismiss. Harry already knew what it was, but as the image steadied in front of his eyes, he couldn't prevent every cell in his body from going cold. The Ministry. The door. The rooms. The room. Snape's mind beckoned it closer with such speed that Harry could feel himself staggering in the distance.

The room. The people. Neville. Lupin. Moody. Harry's lips were dry. He wanted to move them, to protect himself from that memory, but his throat disobeyed him. His vocal cords had gone numb. Tonks. Hurt--very hurt. Lucius Malfoy--attacking him. Kingsley. Bellatrix. Sirius... Harry's arm was limp. What was the spell again? Tears were crawling up to his eyes--he needed to drag them down. The duel. He had to drag them down. A corner of his mind recalled Snape's advice about using his mind's will. Why wasn't his will working? Bellatrix had raised her wand and Sirius... Sirius had staggered... Sirius was falling... and so was Harry.

Defenceless, unable to recall a spell, any spell, to fend off this memory, incapable of forcing Harry's mouth to beg Snape to stop, Harry's mind fought the invasion in the only way it had left. It shut down. The world darkened, and Harry could hardly breathe, but he was conscious when he felt himself crashing against one of Snape's shelves. He heard the faint noises of glass smashing on the floor, he knew that he, too, had fallen limply against the stone--a sticky substance was soaking the left side of his robes, but he had prevented the tears from falling, he had escaped that memory, and the room, Snape's room was slowly coming back to life around him, and it was all that mattered.

Snape loomed above him, his wand now lowered, beckoning him up. Harry tried. And failed. A shelf had fallen on him, all its contents anchoring him to the stone floor. Harry groaned. Something sharp dug against his back, more deeply with every attempt to hoist himself up.

'Potter, stand up!'

Harry groaned again, earnestly trying to obey him, but he had to crouch back down, because it hurt, surely there was blood on his back already? Snape kneeled beside him--even his breath seemed angry at Harry. The shelf was removed, and there were hissed *Reparos* in every direction. But Harry was still soaked, and now that he could move, he sat on his knees, wiping his jumper and twisting the end of his soggy cloak.

On the floor, between them, glinted the shard of glass that had paralysed him. Snape had removed it from his back. Snape, who was so very, very close, had prevented him from getting hurt. Snape, who was inches from him, was tending to his safety. The memory of that terrible night, the terror that still filled him months later, paled in face of the warmth that spread inside him at the realisation that he could... just once...

Harry rose slightly, gaze fastened on Snape's suddenly reachable face. He took just one breath, one quivering breath... and kissed him.

For some reason, his eyes were still open. It felt a bit like moving in a dream. Harry wanted to press his lips more firmly against Snape's, yet he didn't dare move a single millimetre. It could break the spell. But the touch was lighter now, and Snape moved as though he meant to stand. In a jolt of panic, Harry gripped Snape's shoulders with an energy that had somehow survived the onslaught on his mind, bringing him closer and refusing to accept the possibility that he would have to let go.

... and then, softly, gracefully, and truly as it might go in a dream, the tension under Harry's hands eased, and lips brushed his, pressed against them, coached them to part. Snape's tongue was moist against his. Snape's hands ghosted over his hands, up his arms, they reached his back. Just for that moment, Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself to relax. Snape's lips no longer brushed his timidly. They pressed against his mouth, teasing it, awakening it, his fingertips burned trails wherever they passed, there was a faint scent of something that he couldn't quite identify, but he knew he liked it, because how could he not? The mouth over his was possessive now, insistent. The arms held him closer, the outline of a lower body crept dangerously close to his own. Snape's whole body crawled over him, pushed him over the toppled shelf, pressing him up and against the wall. Harry was vaguely aware of his own enthusiastic response, but it seemed to come by proxy, as though his mind was watching his body's reactions from a distance. The wall was cold, he had trouble breathing--in fact, he even had trouble keeping himself up, and still he pulled Snape closer, still he yearned for more. The body so delightfully propped against his shifted, the pressure eased again, and Harry, gripped by the sudden fear that this might end, moved faster than lightning to pin Snape against the wall. It must have been the element of surprise that allowed him to dig into one of Snape's shoulders and hook his arm around the other, and press one leg against Snape's. One of his hands, he wasn't sure which one, came up to play with the collar of Snape's shirt and tease the skin inside it. His other hand moved to Snape's lower back, and he really wasn't sure he knew what Snape's hands were doing now, but they were certainly skilful.

The inexorable need to breathe broke them apart, and yet Harry's mouth moved of its own volition down the side of Snape's face, taking in the breath that Snape's mouth let out against his neck.

A moment... an hour...? later, there was a definite change in their rhythm as Snape's hands grasped his arms brusquely to wrench him away. A reluctant sigh leaving him, Harry's eyelids fluttered open, and he raised his eyes to his teacher's. Thanks to their awkward position against that blessed wall, they were at eye level, and even so, it took a moment for Harry to register that Snape clearly didn't want to kiss him any more.

Snape's voice was so low as he voiced that thought that Harry, rather than hear the words, felt the hot breath forming them. 'Leave,' the breath said. 'Leave~~now~~.'

'Why?' he asked quietly, his body beginning to lean on Snape's as he refused to face the current situation. Snape grasped him more forcefully and held him at arm's length.

'Get out. Now.' There was a shadow of his usual, authoritative tone in his voice. Still, it wasn't enough for Harry, whose mind was entirely focused on a spot on Snape's neck that danced between light and obscurity with every word Snape said. He brushed it with his fingertips and Snape hissed. 'Look at me.' Nice, smooth, warm skin... 'Look at me. Properly. Look at me,' Snape said more audibly. Harry obeyed. 'I want you--to leave this room--right now.' Each word was marked clearly. Harry cocked his head at him, as though the message were obscure.

'You're still holding me,' he pointed out, his only justification before laying his lips, ever so softly, on the spot that his fingers had just vacated. Snape pushed him away and

held him at a distance, looking him in the eye. Harry observed the muscle throbbing in his temple, the heaving breath rumbling under Snape's robes, the arms that had held him just a moment ago, and slowly, reluctantly, his conscience returned. There was a hint of fear in his eyes as he raised them to Snape's again. Snape. He had kissed Snape. Snape was telling him to leave. And his arms still hadn't let go of Harry...

'Get away from me--now. *Get away... from me,*' Snape breathed out.

I kissed Snape and he kissed me back was all that Harry's mind could rationalise at the moment. Snape's arms finally left his, and the next 'Get away from me,' held a distinct note of menace. Reality finished its slow, but inexorable descent. Harry shifted from mild unease to scared realisation, to actual fright, as he took a step back, and another, crouching to pick up his wand, his eyes still trained on Snape.

Snape's own gaze didn't waver until Harry's very fingertips reached the doorknob, and Harry scanned the empty corridor, his eyes widening with panic. Snape was still leaning against the wall, his arms apparently limp by his sides, but Harry knew that he was shaking because a strand of his hair was randomly brushing the spot Harry's mouth had kissed. Under normal circumstances, the very thought of Snape shaking would have been absurd. But a great deal of things had been absurd until just a second ago, Harry thought, pursing his lips and closing the door softly behind himself. Turning on his heels, he took a deep breath and ran.

Masquerade

Chapter 11 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry only stopped running once he reached the Fat Lady, whom he almost ripped from her portrait in his haste to get to shelter. He had barely set foot in the common room when Parvati and Lavender ambushed him.

'Later, Parvati,' he panted, at her insistence that he try on Firmin's suit.

'Harry, everyone's already done it!

'Later, Lavender.'

'But, Harry, it can't--'

'Later!'

He sprinted down the stairs to the dormitory. Ron, who had crouched by the fire, fanning a slightly indisposed Hermione, shrugged at Lavender.

'Need any help, Harry?' Hermione called towards the stairs, exchanging a concerned glance with Ron. In response, the dormitory room slammed shut.

Harry sat on the bed, trying to catch his breath and wrap his mind around what he had done. No, he was quite sure that he didn't need Hermione's help. What had he done, again?

Snape. He had kissed Snape. And he had been kissed back--by Snape. That detail had to be highlighted. He hadn't been alone in it. They had kissed. And now... perhaps he should start packing. Because he was going to be expelled. Maybe packing was unnecessary. Because Snape was going to kill him. At least. He was never going to live this down. Ever.

Harry lay back with a groan and stared at the ceiling through his tense fingers. He could feel the panic tumbling around in his chest. Once the room stopped spinning, he tried to make sense of what had happened. He had collapsed, and Snape had helped him--an absurd event in itself. And then Harry had kissed him. That was a neat description. Harry gulped. There was no way to gloss over that bit. He had kissed Snape. And... Snape had kissed him back. Yes, that bit, too, was remarkable. His lips still tingled, his arms still ached. He had been pushed away. He had virtually been tossed from the room. And here he was.

A cooler mind than his might be more frustrated with his imminent expulsion and the consequent end of his life as a wizard than with the interruption of the kiss. Because he was going to be expelled. Snape might be in the headmaster's office already, telling Dumbledore all about Harry's latest prank, as he was bound to call it, and Dumbledore would toss him out of Hogwarts as swiftly as Snape had shoved him out of his room.

Harry's eyes rested on the window, half-expecting to see an unknown owl waiting for an owl treat in exchange for a stern letter with the Ministry's seal, telling him that he was henceforth expelled from the school due to his 'unacceptable behaviour towards a member of the staff'. Fortunately, the only traces of an owl were three or four snowy-white feathers reminding him that Hedwig must still be delivering the next practice's timetable to his team mates.

His breath had steadied somewhat--perhaps now he could think more clearly. Dumbledore might not expel him. He had always stood by Harry... and Harry had gone so far, on so many occasions... ignoring the part of his brain that reminded him of the times in which he had hovered just this side of expulsion, for nobler reasons than a hormonal mutiny, Harry wondered if there was any way he could make Dumbledore understand that this incident could have happened with anybody else.

But it hadn't happened with anybody else, Harry groaned, covering his face with a pillow. It had happened to him, with Snape. Perhaps Snape wouldn't tell...? He had, after all, kissed Harry back. This particular thought succeeded in bringing a smile to his lips. Telling Dumbledore about the kiss would be the fastest way of getting himself sacked. Even if Snape was a member of the Order, Harry was sure, he knew, that Dumbledore wouldn't condone this sort of behaviour. Hadn't Hagrid, Dumbledore's precious Hagrid, been dismissed twice, even as a member of the Order?

And what would he say? Harry thought. *That he'd like to hear Dumbledore's thoughts on the kiss that he and I shared during the lesson that Dumbledore inflicted on us both?* The mere suggestion would have been funny if Harry wasn't so scared. They had rehearsal in less than an hour. What was he going to do? How was Snape going to act? Would he humiliate him publicly? Unlikely--he would be implicating himself. Perhaps Harry would get off with just a few jibes when no-one else was around.

Harry ignored the stirring that coursed through his body at the thought of Snape being close enough to whisper in his ear. The last time he had been so close, Harry had kissed him. And, scarily enough, he couldn't be sure that he wouldn't try it again, given half a chance. Grin. A sharp return to the matter at hand was in order.

Oh, yes. The punishment Snape had in store for him. Unfortunately, he had already dealt Harry the worst punishment he could imagine upon tossing him out of the room. Changing his clothes was a definite priority. Harry sighed, tossing the pillow aside and scanning the room for his clothing.

He was halfway inside a clean set, had almost finished cleaning his torso of the sticky potion that had seeped through his robes, when Ron entered and saw him rubbing his back. Harry raised his eyes from his soiled jumper, relieved that it wasn't ripped.

'What's that on your back?' Ron asked briskly, referring to the red mark that the shard of glass had left on his skin.

'Nothing,' Harry said dismissively, hoping Ron wasn't in an investigative mood. 'I stepped back at the wrong time.'

'Stepped back,' Ron deadpanned.

'Yeah. Why the interest?' Harry snapped defensively. 'I get worse than this from practice.'

'You're not alone with Snape during practice.'

Harry blinked. Ron was more serious than Harry had ever heard him.

'Is there anything I should know about, Harry?'

'No!' Harry replied. Ron frowned at the swiftness of the answer.

'It's nothing. I really just lost my balance and bumped against one of those hideous pickled things Snape has down there. Could have been worse,' Harry clarified reassuringly. Still, Ron didn't look convinced.

'Ron... really. Don't worry. He didn't do anything to me.' Somewhere in the back of his mind, Harry's wicked inner voice fell into gales of laughter. Snape probably wished he could say the same thing about Harry. 'He didn't attack me, or anything,' Harry specified. He really couldn't make it clearer than this.

'Right.' Ron cleared his throat. 'Hermione and I just thought you might... want to talk or something. So... you want us to wait in the common room, or...'

'I'm not really hungry. I'll see you for the rehearsal. Did Parkinson give back Neville's script, by the way?'

Ron ignored the blatant change of subject.

'Harry, you haven't been eating at all...'

'I've just come out of Occlumency,' Harry said, somewhat apologetically. 'You understand, don't you?'

Ron nodded again, still gazing at Harry. 'See you downstairs, then?'

Harry nodded vigorously. Ron stared for another moment and then left. Harry watched his retreating back, sure that in a minute Hermione, too, would know about the mark on his back.

'Damn,' he grumbled, picking up a shirt and a jumper and spotting something on his arm that he had missed. His upper arms, now slightly pale due to his continuous use of long sleeves since term start, bore several red welts that were clearly fingerprints.

Ron had seen them. Ron had *stared* at them.

Things were the usual mess downstairs with people dragging chairs, shouting and chatting, Neville looking for one lost item or another. Harry watched Ron warily, wondering if the kiss showed in his face. Seamus, at least, didn't seem to notice it. Their Potions master was talking to Blaise and McGonagall, a sight that filled Harry with involuntary dread. Rather unwillingly, he joined Neville and a pensive Pansy just as Snape took Hermione to their usual spot, away from the crowd.

Two hours later, Harry had fumed a lot and worked very little. The familiarity between Snape and Hermione seemed more inappropriate than ever to him, as did Snape's palm on her forehead, ostensibly there to feel her temperature. Surely her temperature would be lower if he didn't touch her so often? And why didn't Blaise prevent his girlfriend from draping herself over the school's less sociable teacher?

'Potter, even Longbottom's doing a better job than you,' Pansy snapped. 'For a few days, now. Shouldn't that be alarming for you, or somesuch?'

Harry frowned, as that was the nicest thing he had ever heard from Pansy regarding a non-Slytherin, but he otherwise ignored her.

'Potter, do you mind? We're still working, here,' Malfoy snapped rudely. The façade was beginning to crack, Harry imagined. How two people who were so clearly perfect for one another could go through the trouble of breaking up was simply beyond him. He checked his script absently, stealing glances at Snape and Hermione, which prompted a laugh from Pansy.

'Your lovely's not running off, Potter.'

Harry nearly had a heartstop. 'What was that?'

Pansy shrugged. 'She's not running off with our Head of house, at least. So I suggest you get back to work.' She added an insult to Harry's grandparents and crossed her arms petulantly.

Hermione's head had got dangerously close to Snape in the excitement of a conversation, and Harry didn't notice the concerned looks both he and Hermione were getting from Ron, just as he couldn't know that he was now the matter of conversation between Malfoy and Ginny.

Midnight arrived, and the torturous session was finally over. Ron was poised protectively beside Harry, who looked vacant while everyone else gathered their affairs. He was strangely disappointed to see that Snape hadn't so much as looked his way all night. Yet he had talked to Hermione for three hours, which was just infuriating. None of them had been berated for their own lack of commitment to the rehearsal.

Harry waited until most of his yearmates had left and made his way towards Snape, ready to wrench Hermione from his side if need be. He didn't know how he would justify that, but he would think something up on the way. Ron wanted to follow him, but a curt, 'Wait here,' made him freeze reluctantly, watching from afar.

Hermione's back was turned to Harry. He tickled her sides to make his presence known, and she yelped.

'Your highness is expected,' he said playfully, resting his head on her shoulder and determinedly refusing to look above Snape's knees.

Hermione hissed. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't see the time. I'm almost done.' She proceeded to pick up things at random.

'The conversation was too interesting for you to care about minor things like sleeping hours?' Harry asked, his eyes finally rising to Snape's chest. Their teacher handed Hermione a piece of parchment, and Harry noted with displeasure that his hand had lingered far longer than necessary. The fact that Snape was instructing her on something regarding that parchment was irrelevant.

'Shall we, then?' Harry added hastily, his arms around her waist, shaking her playfully and bravely resisting the urge to haul her up and away.

She nodded her assent, turning to Snape. 'Thank you, Professor.'

Snape only nodded in response and Harry frowned. Hermione was elaborating on her thank yous.

'You're welcome,' Snape said curtly, cutting her off. 'You'd do well to watch your own health instead of worrying about nonsense like that.'

'Well...' Hermione's eyes and her smile moved from Snape to Harry. 'I'm ready.'

'Just a second,' Harry told her, standing between Hermione and Snape. 'I was wondering if I'm still having that lesson tomorrow, sir.'

Snape's eyes narrowed slightly.

'Because of Quidditch practice, Professor. Like you said, I've been running a bit late the last few days, and I was wondering if you'd want to reschedule the Wednesday lessons or...' Or cancel them all, he finished in his mind, his throat clenching around the words.

Snape sighed. 'I thought by now you'd know that Quidditch practice takes no precedence over my lessons, Potter.' Both Harry and Hermione sighed in relief, albeit for different reasons, and Snape continued, 'But there'll be no lesson tomorrow. I have no time to pamper you this week.'

With a polite, 'Miss Granger,' he stepped around Harry and left. His robes brushed Harry's right arm, and it took Harry a singular effort to refrain from gripping them. He quietly followed an outraged Hermione towards Ron.

'He has no time?!' She mimicked his tone angrily. 'He can't do that!'

'Yes, he can,' Harry countered needlessly.

'Can't do what?' Ron asked, as they reached him.

'Professor Snape says he doesn't have *time* for Harry's Occlumency lesson this week,' Hermione explained.

'Really? Great, he's better off without these lessons,' Ron replied, looking at a tight-lipped Harry.

'Stop that,' Hermione snapped reproachfully. 'You know Harry needs them. He's not having them for the fun of it.'

'Honestly, I think *Snape* might be having a little too much fun,' Ron said darkly.

Hermione's eyes widened. 'What?'

'You're not starting again, are you?' Harry snapped, hoping that his glare conveyed it to Ron that Harry would kill him if he spoke too much.

'I just mean that Snape might be using these lessons as a way to see Harry get hurt--or relive moments when he was hurt. I don't trust him,' Ron grumbled. They walked up the stairs in uncomfortable silence.

On The Slytherin Flight of Stairs, they found Blaise, who had been waiting for Hermione. Ron's scowl deepened upon spotting him.

'Hey, Blaise,' Harry saluted. 'All alone?'

'Draco came with me, but I don't know where he got himself. I told him to leave me alone.'

'I've been doing that for years.' Harry grinned. 'He never does.'

Blaise gave him a small smile. 'You were really out of it today, Harry. You know this can't go on...'

'Sorry,' Harry said sincerely. 'I was upset about... stuff. But I'll make up for it tomorrow.'

'Anything serious?' Blaise asked pensively.

'No,' Ron interrupted. Hermione elbowed him.

'So... you coming, Ron?' Harry pushed him tentatively towards the stairs.

'Yes, please do,' Hermione coolly requested. Blaise nodded politely at them and turned his attention to her.

Ron's temper was still flaring when they entered the dormitory. "'Yes, please do" ... are we her servants, now? When is she this formal? I told you! He's rubbing off on her!'

'Ron, the others want to sleep...' Harry noted.

Ron lowered his tone and ranted his way into his pyjamas. Then, as Harry changed into his own, Ron caught a glimpse of the red fingerprints on his arms and paused.

Harry caught the sudden silence and swiftly put on the top of his pyjamas. 'It's really not what you think.'

'You don't know what I'm thinking,' Ron answered quietly.

'Yes, I do. And you're wrong. Snape's not... abusing his position. Not more than usual, at least. Believe me.'

Ron pursed his lips, his eyes still on Harry's arms, but he nodded and got in bed. Harry did the same.

'Harry.'

Harry closed his eyes. 'Hmm?'

'If... if anything does happen...' Harry made an indignant sound and Ron raised his voice a bit. 'Not necessarily with Snape. If anything... if there's any problem at all... you know you can talk to me about it, don't you?'

Harry smiled into the sheets. He had used that very same speech with Ginny a while ago.

'I know. And if I need to, I will. But now... there really isn't anything to talk about.'

'Hmm...'

'I know you're worried. I saw you today--you wanted to protect me...' Harry hoisted himself up with a grin, to give Ron a clear view of his fluttering eyelashes. Ron tossed his pillow at him. 'Aww, he doesn't like to show his softer side...'

'Okay, forget it. When you need help, don't come to me for it,' Ron grunted from under his own bedclothes.

'How fickle!'

Ron answered with a loud yawn.

'Ron...'

'Hmm.'

'Thanks.'

'Welcome,' Ron replied sleepily. 'Anytime. And gimme back my pillow.'

Harry threw it back at him and drifted away in his own thoughts.

Long after Ron had fallen asleep, Harry's fingers were still reaching up to touch his tingling lips. They even tasted differently when he ran his tongue over them. His arms were still warm from Snape's grip. A foreign scent lingered all over him. Lowering the collar of his pyjama to look at his arm, he could see them, fainter now, in the moonlight--Snape's fingerprints. Harry stared at the dancing shadows on the ceiling for a long time, before drifting off into a dream of the nicer points of the kiss. His last thought before falling asleep, his hand still covering his upper arm, was that he had been marked.

True to his word, Snape gave him no Occlumency lessons that week, which quickly became the most boring period of Harry's life. His growing discomfort didn't help matters. He had now become invisible during Potions. Just a few weeks ago, Harry would have paid dearly for this sort of indifference. But now... even a glare would have been preferable.

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed to have achieved 'Malfoy status' in Snape's class. Harry told himself repeatedly that Snape only showered her with attention because of her bogglingly worsening health. She no longer paid daily visits to the hospital wing, but Madam Pomfrey's lips grew thinner with every sighting of her.

And yet, it was rather hard for Harry to hold onto this theory, in great part because Hermione tended to look her best when Snape was in the vicinity. She had also taken to vanishing from sight every now and then, returning later on with a deep flush on her cheeks.

On one occasion, Harry had sprinted out of Potions to catch up with Dean on the way up to the Great Hall. Shortly later, Hermione had staggered to their bench, plopping down beside them, pale as the dead. When questioned, she merely panted that she had stayed behind to clear a few doubts with Snape and that the way up had exhausted her. And then she had held Ginny's arm for support and refused to elaborate.

After this incident, Ron's already vigorous dislike of Snape deepened even further in spite of Hermione's reproaches and Harry's apathy regarding his concern.

Harry rather felt that he was the victim of a conspiracy. Even Neville had managed to escape Snape's wrath. There had been the one occasion when Snape had had a twist of cruelty and paired him with Malfoy. But Malfoy was a shadow of his former self, and he left Neville alone after the customary stinging salute. A cauldron behind which stood a Malfoy never received anything other than compliments; therefore, it had been a singularly pleasant class for Neville.

Harry did have the odd moment of sane thought during which he had long arguments with himself, lamenting his poor choices in matters of the heart and berating his hormones for making him lose track of his once clear feelings about the most hated man in the school. Yet, every time he decided to fight his hormones and go back to normality, the man in question somehow entered the room, and Harry's determination invariably crumbled to his feet.

The fact that Snape achieved this just by breathing in the same room as Harry was too unsettling for words.

Harry hated the longing that he knew must show in his face whenever he gazed at Snape prancing about the place as though nothing had happened, having mature discussions with Malfoy and Hermione, sparing Blaise the time for long, long conversations, and even finding the time to give Ron some long, long answers to whichever questions he raised during the rehearsals.

Above all, he hated the distance that Ron strived to impose between Harry and Snape, and the fact that Snape did absolutely nothing to counter it.

Before the week was over, Harry was ready to shout above the clutter of the cauldrons that it was very impolite of Snape to ignore somebody he had almost shagged in his own office.

Because Snape was unlikely to enjoy that, he gave up on the idea, but just thinking it up had already given him a bitter notion of the extent of his current feelings. Snape's indifference, the thought that even after his insane behaviour just a few days ago, he was simply too unimportant to warrant a change in behaviour, should have been enough to prevent Harry from casting him melancholy glances every time he passed by, ignoring Harry daintily.

And still, showering everyone else with attention.

It was revolting.

Snape had warned them that he might be late on Saturday afternoon, so Harry and Hermione took the chance to work together for a bit. If she made another mention of the lovely morning she had spent working with Snape, Harry would have to throttle her. The plan must have shown on his face, because after a few minutes, she whispered, 'Harry, is there anything wrong?'

'Masquerade! Paper faces on parade...' came the resounding voices of their classmates. Blaise had finally allowed them to work with music, and the walls were now shaking with their thunderous *Masquerade Ball*.

'It's nothing.' He sighed. 'Really.'

'Are you mad at me?' She asked timidly.

'Not again, Hermione. Why would I?' He groaned.

'Hide your face, so the world will never find you!'

'You've been snapping at me all afternoon...'

Harry swore under his breath. 'Look, I'm just in a bad mood. It's got nothing to do with you.' How someone with such a sad face could still look so infuriated was beyond him. 'This hasn't really been a good week for me. But I'm not mad at you. Really. Sorry if I snapped at you.'

'True is false...'

Hermione looked at him doubtfully and he rolled his eyes. 'I liked you better when you weren't so insecure.'

'I suppose my week hasn't been great either,' she murmured, raising her eyes to his. 'Have you been dreaming again?'

A stinging heat rose to Harry's face. 'Dreaming?'

'Yes... you know... about Lord Voldemort...?'

Harry shook his head vehemently. No, he most definitely hadn't been dreaming about Voldemort.

'Well, what is it, then?'

'I, huh... I've been, huh... Let's just say I've been, er, developing an interest in a person. And we, huh... we kissed,' he blurted out, red with embarrassment.

Hermione's sunny grin fell when his face remained glum. 'And...?'

Harry furrowed his brow, as if the next words demanded a strong effort of concentration. 'And at least now I know exactly how I feel. And it's not mutual.'

The dismissive smile he had forced onto his mouth only deepened Hermione's seriousness. 'You didn't... you didn't force a situation with this... whoever it is, did you?'

'It's hard to explain,' Harry replied, shaking his head negatively. 'But no, I didn't. Hermione...!'

'I'm sorry, I just had to ask... you look so glum...!'

'It just... happened. It was over before we knew it. And I don't really want to talk about this right now. How about you? You and Blaise?'

She shrugged. 'We're giving it a last chance. He's so committed... and I'm so confused... I can't even think about losing him, and yet...'

'There's someone else,' Harry recalled.

Hermione's expression shifted from pensive to anxious in the blink of an eye. 'He's beginning to show an interest--I think. And I really, really don't want to drive him away.'

'Lucky you, then,' Harry managed to croak out, rather feeling like he had been dipped in icy water.

'Lucky me...!' She snorted. 'Could I possibly have made a wronger choice?! And Blaise, I can't do this to him...!' Harry fleetingly wondered if the Gryffindor girls thought that their house's notion of chivalry didn't apply to them. 'I just feel that I... enabled him. I should have stopped thinking of him ages ago, and I didn't, and now...'

'He's reciprocating,' Harry completed for her.

'Yes... I *think* he is, at any rate. I wish he weren't. This would be so much easier if he just kept ignoring me...'

Harry nodded stiffly.

'This can't happen. It simply can't!' The mere possibility seemed to shock Hermione beyond belief. Harry pushed her chin up with his forefinger.

'Why not, Hermione?' he asked very, very quietly.

'Can't!' she repeated. Harry felt more miserable than ever.

'Shouldn't you be saving the romantic encounters for dawn, or something?' Malfoy barked from behind Ginny. Blaise, too, was looking at them. They gestured apologetically to him and sat up.

'So...!' Hermione sighed. 'Which scene were we...?'

'This one.' Harry pointed at the script.

'That's the kiss...!' Hermione pointed out, flushing. Harry looked up.

'Yeah, Snape wouldn't let us work on it the other day, I thought maybe we could try it out at least once.'

'...in case we need to do it?' Hermione nodded absently, eyes flickering through the scene.

'Of course, if you'll only consider doing it with Snape... Harry added, hoping to disguise the embittered edge in his voice.

'Don't be silly,' she said, not unkindly. 'I just thought you might be uncomfortable doing--this--with me...'

'Are you?' he smirked. 'Think well before you answer.'

'Do you really think you can intimidate the Classics' Official Kisser?' She fanned herself petulantly. 'By the way, what an infamous, classless title you got me...'

Harry had to laugh. She cleared her throat, signalling for him to get ready.

'Oh, you *are* uncomfortable...!' she whispered accusingly. 'Relax! I promise I won't bite you.'

Harry fidgeted flamboyantly. 'Better now?'

They looked around. No one seemed to be paying attention to them. So much the better. The others were on their second round of the Masquerade. Harry and Hermione said their lines very quietly, approaching discreetly. Their lips touched lightly and they pulled back immediately.

'At last someone who doesn't regret kissing me,' Harry commented, lightening up the statement with a naughty face. Hermione stuck her tongue out at him.

'Don't get too full of yourself. You're not that good.'

Harry smirked. 'Comparing me to the boyfriend?! No fair! He's had time to practice!'

'Let's try it again, then.' She winked. This time, they ignored the lines and went straight for the kiss.

'Better?' Hermione asked through her teeth. Their lips had lingered together for a second longer.

'I think I need another try.'

'Mr Potter, how awfully unprofessional of you!' She poked him playfully.

'I am entranced, my Angel of Music...!' He grinned, wrapping his arms around her waist, and putting on a scowl. 'Why? Are you insinuating this is a sacrifice?'

She clamped her hands over her mouth in mock panic. 'Oh, I didn't...'

He didn't wait for permission before kissing her again. Ron greeted them with a whistle. Both Harry and Hermione raised their chins defiantly.

'Shouldn't you be working instead of making us lose our concentration? Amateurs...!' She clicked her tongue reproachfully.

'Besides,' Harry added, tightening his hold on Hermione and resting his head on her shoulder. 'I'm incredibly possessive. Look elsewhere.'

Ron held up his hands, turning to his group. Blaise's gaze rested on them for a moment and then he, too, went back to work. Beside him, Pansy smiled in delight, Malfoy frowned and Ginny eyed him with something akin to worry.

Harry and Hermione, still laughing at the absurd of the situation, couldn't really care less.

'Will you kiss me already?!' she snapped.

Harry pretended to cower. His embrace swiftly tightened and he leaned in for a nice, long, French kiss that drew a sincerely impressed whistle from Pansy. 'Who would have known Potter had it in him?'

'Masquerade!'

And then, as Harry's eyes roamed the place, watching their mates finishing the choreography that he would have to force Ron to teach him, the Great Hall became blurry and the floor appeared to sway under his feet. Behind Ron, arms crossed and raised eyebrow, sourer than Harry had ever seen him, stood Snape.

'Run and hide but a face will still pursue you!'

Thinking of Him

Chapter 12 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Well, he *had* wanted attention from Snape, Harry thought, sinking in his bed with a groan. He had received it. He had been granted five full seconds of the purest loathing before Snape's glare shifted to Hermione, his voice blank as he asked for a few minutes of her attention, 'if Potter could survive without her, of course'. Blushing deeply, she had taken the hand that he offered her--the hand that he *offered* her--leaving Harry alone for a humiliating session of pats on the back.

'You know, if this were anyone other than Granger, I'd be feeling sorry for Blaise,' Pansy had cackled.

'Blaise doesn't have anything to worry about. Not from me, at least.'

'That's a relief,' Blaise had replied, somewhat sarcastically. That night, for the first time since he could remember, Blaise was less than impeccable towards him. He also had a row with Hermione on the way up to the portrait hole, which plastered a grin on Ron's face that he was still wearing in his sleep. Blaise had apologised for his behavior before going downstairs, but that didn't help Harry's mood.

Sunday, and Quidditch practice, arrived. Hermione had rushed to the toilet after breakfast, and she remained out of their sight until the rehearsal.

Harry, who had bullied Ron into teaching him the Masquerade choreography, was too busy hypothesising about where she was, and with whom, to focus on his own work. Considering she had barely worked with Malfoy at all, he wondered if they should even bother leaving in the romantic sequences.

In fact, she seemed to be going out of her way to steer clear of Malfoy, although the rest of their work and the approaching deadlines forced them to have civilised conversations quite often.

Somehow, though, anchoring herself to Snape was the only way Hermione appeared to have found to escape Malfoy, who still found his dormant sarcasm every time he and Harry met.

On Monday, she anchored herself to Harry, for a change. Having felt somewhat ill early on, she was wondering if he wouldn't mind accompanying her to Madam Pomfrey for some information regarding the tests--of whose results Snape apparently hadn't bothered to inform her. Harry repressed the urge to tell her that she was a spoiled attention seeker, in great part because she had been very discreet and was trying to disturb as few people as possible. He agreed to go with her after their afternoon classes.

'But Madam Pomfrey, those results should have been ready days ago!' Hermione was perplexed.

'I know, dear, but your symptoms vary every day, and the tests have to be redone...!' the poor nurse explained. 'Professor Snape seems to be getting somewhere, but he's... hmm... a peculiar researcher, and he will never share his conclusions ahead of time. Do give us a few more days, dear. I know it's hard, but we need them.'

Hermione accepted this answer with some impatience.

'It's not like I'm doing it on purpose...!' She was murmuring on their way to the door when Madam Pomfrey decided to ask them one last question.

'Miss Granger, dear...'

'Yes?'

'...have you been taking proper care of yourself?'

Hermione blinked at her, and then replied hesitantly, 'Yes, I... I think I am, ma'am.'

Madam Pomfrey nodded grimly, turning back to a second year whose ears had sprouted mushrooms.

Harry stared at Hermione. She shrugged and they returned to the common room.

Tuesday was a black day from the start. Snape was in a foul mood, and Harry was starting to think that his teacher's response to the kiss might have happened solely in his imagination. How the wizarding tabloids would love to know that he had assaulted a teacher, his most hated teacher, the one who was inexplicably haunting his dreams.

When Snape came over to check on the potion he and Hermione were brewing, Harry reached uncomfortably behind her to retrieve her notes--his were ostensibly all wrong--thus bringing himself very close to a certain teacher. The space was so cramped, in fact, that in the process of picking up her bag, he somehow plastered himself completely to Snape.

'I'm sorry, Professor, there's very little room here...' he said innocently, gesturing to imply that it would be in poor taste to lean against Hermione. Once the bag was in his hands, there was even less room, and Snape was virtually trapped between Harry and the pair working behind him. He dared look up when he felt Snape's breath catch, just a inch from Harry's throat.

He couldn't be delusional. The man couldn't be as indifferent as he pretended to be. He just couldn't--even the way he *blinked* denounced tension.

With another muttered, 'I'm sorry,' Harry settled back down, listening to Hermione's explanations. Hours later, he still didn't have the foggiest about what they had been brewing.

Lunch was a less jolly affair. Ernie trapped him in a conversation about their upcoming match, which would probably have to be postponed due to the weather, and Ron observed, with the grin of the Cheshire Cat, Hermione and Blaise's quiet conversation.

'Never seen her so serious.' He grinned when Harry asked what had happened.

Blaise, too, looked very serious. Hermione looked miserable, but determined as usual. It was easy to imagine what they were discussing.

They had just regained their places when the food was sent up. Blaise had pecked her lightly on the cheek before walking down the table, but just as he turned his back to her, Hermione seized his arm and pulled him into a tight hug. In spite of his obvious discomfort with the public display of affection, he kissed her cheek again and whispered something in her ear before striding away.

She dropped, rather than sat, down on the bench, sighing, 'Broke up,' to Harry and Ron. Even Harry's well-aimed kick didn't make Ron's grin waver.

'Who was the first to see the Light?'

'I was,' she muttered, apparently unaffected by his choice of words. 'It was for the best. I think...'

The very next second, she stood and almost ran out of the Great Hall. Ron wanted to follow her, but Harry held him back.

'Keep that grin away from her. I need my Keeper alive on Saturday,' he warned, going after Hermione himself.

She was in the common room, sitting by the fire and fiddling idly with the hem of her robes. The Grey Lady floated about, humming *Think of Me*, perhaps in a misguided attempt to make Hermione feel better. Sparing the Ravenclaw ghost one startled look, Harry sat down beside Hermione.

'*Think of me fondly, when we've said goodbye,*' the Grey Lady sang delicately, reading the spines of the scattered books.

'Do you think he'll think of me fondly?' Hermione finally wondered.

'Blaise?' Harry asked. She nodded. 'Why wouldn't he?'

'He just... likes me so much, and maybe if I'd tried harder...'

'If you'd faked it, you mean?'

After a long silence, she looked at him pleadingly. 'It was for the best, wasn't it, Harry? *It was*, wasn't it?'

Harry squeezed her hand. 'I think it was.'

'Later, it would only hurt more, right?'

'It would only hurt more,' he agreed.

She recoiled in her seat. 'Then it shouldn't be hurting so much now...'

Harry momentarily didn't know what to say. His own break-up with Cho had been so hurried and confused he hadn't quite had the time to feel hurt.

'I suppose... it's because there's good stuff for you to remember--the other way around would be worse, wouldn't it?'

'I guess...' She smiled faintly. 'I like that logic. But I still can't help wondering... if...'

'Are you sorry already?' Harry asked tensely, hoping that she didn't recognise the hopeful note in his voice.

'No,' she said resolutely. 'I was deceiving him. I didn't actually, you know...' She gestured significantly. 'But who knows what might happen? At least now I know where I stand.'

'And what are you going to do now?'

She hesitated. 'Nothing, I think... I don't really think it's wise to jump into... something... so soon...'

Somehow, plopped on the chair, her pale, tired face so melancholy, she looked prettier than ever to Harry. He didn't know anyone else who looked better after an illness than before. The sheer impossibility of competing with her for Snape's attention was almost palpable.

'Good luck,' was the one thing that he managed to choke out, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

'Blaise wished me luck, too.' Hermione smiled, swiftly adding, 'I didn't tell him there was someone else, of course, but he knows. I know he does. And he still found it in him to bid me luck.'

'And you dumped him?' The words were out before Harry could stop them.

'I did.' It appeared Hermione was starting to get angry at herself. 'For an arrogant, bullying--' She clamped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

Harry's smile turned into something like a leer. 'Let me guess. He's a Slytherin, too.'

She nodded meekly. Harry considered his options for a moment. She was confiding in him. Knowing Hermione, she would be expecting him to do the same with her, at some point. Why not give her an edited version now? Wasn't Hermione's reaction bound to be the best out of the lot, after all?

'So's mine,' he finally ventured, scanning her face as she did a double take.

'Not Pansy?' she replied with a grimace. The very idea was so preposterous that Harry had to laugh. 'I hope she's not as partial to purebloods as, er...'

Harry shut his eyes for a deep breath. When he corrected her, his voice was two octaves lower than his usual tone.

'He. It's a he.'

Hermione's eyes widened so much that the rest of her seemed to be shrinking. 'It's a... he?'

'And a Slytherin,' Harry added in a feeble attempt to lighten the mood. 'Sorry to be such a disappointment.'

Hermione stared at him in silence for such a long time that Harry wondered if she was attempting Legilimency. As the air between them became even tenser, Harry began to feel like he was being tried for a crime he hadn't even had the chance to commit. The scrutiny was so uncomfortable that he almost missed her quiet words.

'You've never disappointed me.'

He blinked. 'Huh?'

Her face was too serious for this to be a misguided attempt at a joke. 'At this point, just knowing that you still have it in you to fall for someone is a relief. I was beginning to think that you'd... anyway. You really couldn't have made it any harder for yourself, could you? Do you have any idea how many expectations there are have about you, about the Boy Who Lived getting married and having a proper, model family?'

'I didn't exactly choose this,' Harry pointed out, somewhat irritably. It was best not to remind her that his chances of living to see the wizarding world's reaction to his sexual preferences were rather slim.

Hermione's expression changed as she took on a shocked tone. 'You must have felt so uncomfortable kissing me!'

Harry's hand went up before she had a chance to rant further on. 'It was great. It was fun. You know you weren't the first girl I kissed. You probably won't be the last. Please, please don't make me feel like a freak. I've had enough of that.'

She looked at him with something like pity. 'And you two kissed?'

Harry shrugged. 'To be totally honest, I kissed *him*.'

She shot him a warning look, and he blurted out, 'He kissed me back. But he also pulled away, and I don't really think he wants to do it again. In fact, I think we might be interested in the same person. And... this couldn't possibly become more embarrassing than it already is, could it?'

'My Slytherin, so to speak, would die before he kissed you, so I very much doubt that's him,' Hermione declared. When Harry opened his mouth, she insisted sternly, 'Believe me. He would.'

There was a creak and Ron's hand waved at them from the gap between door and wall. Floating just above the fireplace, the Grey Lady stopped singing to look at the newcomer.

'Are you decent, children?'

'We're having a private moment, go away,' Harry complained.

'Ah, but the thing is, I can't,' Ron explained, entering the room with a hand across his eyes. 'You skipped lunch and Snape is downstairs, demanding to know why Hermione went to the hospital wing with you without telling anyone that she wasn't feeling well.'

Hermione sighed. 'He really is beginning to worry too much. I'm fine...'

Ron cleared his throat. 'Actually, I'm interested in knowing that, too.'

'You're not jealous of *me*, now, are you?' Harry rolled his eyes. Hermione stared at them.

'I should be.' Ron plopped down between them. 'I want attention, too!'

Harry petted his hair jokingly. Hermione stood. 'Well, I can't keep Professor Snape waiting.'

'Wait,' Ron said hesitantly. 'I have something I need to tell you.'

Harry was standing already, but with a deep breath, Ron added, 'You can hear it, too. I--I just want to apologise for--for that, downstairs, and I just want you to know that... that I'm sorry. I won't even pretend that I'm sorry you broke up with Zabini, but I'm sorry you're hurting, and I really wish you weren't.' The last few words came out all jumbled, but Hermione had apparently understood what he meant because suddenly she had pulled him into a tight hug.

At that precise moment, a tiny firework twirled its way into the room, exploding in a pink and gold mist. Dozens of minuscule pink hearts floated about them in a golden haze.

'What's... this...?' Hermione enquired.

'The twins are here.' Ron grinned. 'These fireworks are for *Moulin Rouge*. I was chasing them upstairs. Uh... on my way to see you, of course.'

As Hermione shoved Ron playfully, Harry walked to the window, two little hearts hovering around his wrist. Snape was downstairs. But he was waiting for Hermione.

They had barely reached the bottom of the stairs when Snape approached to inform them that Hermione would be having her meals with him for the next few days.

'The headmaster has authorised it. In fact, this was his idea,' he clarified before they had a chance to voice their outrage. 'The meals will be served in my office, at the usual time. You are, of course, allowed to bring company, but I must request that you don't turn my private quarters into a darker version of your common room.'

Hermione swiftly assured him that she would try to disturb his personal time as little as possible, and with an admirable amount of composure, considering the situation, she asked him what was the reasoning behind Dumbledore's decision. On either side of her, Harry and Ron fumed heavily.

'It's fortunately a temporary experiment. We want to see how it will impact on your health.'

For the next few hours, Harry entertained the hope that this was Dumbledore's idea of a prank. But by dinner time Hermione had vanished. She reappeared on time for the rehearsal, accompanied by Snape. She looked quite cheery.

Three hours later, Harry was lying face down on his bed, cursing the lack of variety in his thoughts and wondering if Voldemort, too, had forgot about him.

Back in Occlumency

Chapter 13 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Early the next day, Harry fumed at Hermione's absence during breakfast. And then he fumed when she was absent for lunch. Ron joined him in both activities. In a week that was clearly just a string of bad days followed by worse ones, it was good to know that his best friend supported him. He then fumed all afternoon because his customary Occlumency lesson had apparently been scrapped. Ron didn't sympathise with his sulking, and then Harry fumed because he couldn't count on his best friend.

They stayed behind after Quidditch practice, the one good part of the day, their heads spinning with strategies. Shortly later, upon returning to the castle, a familiar squeal of delight caught their attention. Looking left, they expected to see Ginny laughing with her friends in that small garden whose plants seemed to resist the severest winters, but there was only one person with her. Malfoy. Harry and Ron crouched discreetly behind a ticklish bush that frush-frushed whenever they touched it.

'Really?' Ginny was saying. Malfoy, leaning against a tree, nodded smugly. 'Are you serious?'

'Well, if you still don't trust me, I don't know why I'm even here,' he replied, turning lazily towards the castle's entrance.

'No, no, no, wait. How do we do this, then?'

'Are you free tomorrow at six? From six to seven?'

She nodded vigorously, adding, 'Next to the phoenix statue... where exactly?'

'Fourth floor, right wing,' he completed, backing against the wall because she had pounced him. 'Don't do that in public, woman!'

'Thank you.' She grinned, ignoring his words completely.

'You know what you're doing, don't you?'

'Yes!' She squealed, pecking him on the lips and turning instantly crimson.

'Does milady have any further requests, or may I tend to my own business?'

If Ginny had anything else to ask of Malfoy, Harry didn't get to hear it, for Ron pulled him back by the hood of his cloak, and he was dragged back to the castle. They were both silent for the longest time.

'Ron...' Harry ventured hesitantly.

'I hate to agree with Malfoy, but in this case I must. I hope she knows what she's doing, too,' Ron snapped. 'I really do,' he added more softly with one last glance at the bushes hiding the garden from their view.

Ron was unusually lost in thought during dinner. There was the occasional sigh, but at least, Harry thought, the usual rant about Snape never reared its head. And when Hermione entered the Hall, mid-dessert, and Malfoy walked up to her, Ron only spared them an annoyed glance before looking away.

Hermione rejoined them, and Harry summed up the afternoon's events for her. Her face grew progressively serious.

'A date? Ginny and Malfoy?'

'Looked like it.'

Hermione pursed her lips. 'Good luck to her, then. She'll need it.'

'Granger,' came Malfoy's voice from behind her.

She cleared her throat and readjusted herself on her chair to eye him coldly. He looked slightly taken aback by the reception.

'Yes?' she clipped out, her eyebrows raised.

'I just wanted to hand you back your book.' He extended a massive volume. 'Interesting read.'

'Oh.' Her expression softened somewhat. 'Are you finished already?'

He nodded. 'Some of the portrayals are questionable, but it's interesting.'

'Let me guess.' She smirked. 'The Carthagens were to blame.'

'That's not quite what I meant.' He snorted, adding with a leer, 'Though I can see the point.'

'You would.'

A minute later, they sat side by side, discussing their respective theories on the Muggle war. Because everybody was as lacking in concentration as they were, that night's rehearsal was quite forgettable. Had it not been for Dumbledore spurring them on, they might have postponed it.

Snape was on his way out when Harry greeted him with a flat, 'I need to talk to you. Sir.'

He turned slowly and eyed Harry as though he had just scraped him off his shoe. 'Not now, I hope.'

Harry barely blinked. 'It's about my lessons--and it's important.'

'Tomorrow is more convenient,' Snape replied coolly.

Harry thanked him politely and left with an impassive, 'Good night'. He didn't feel quite as calm as he looked. Occlumency was his only believable excuse to talk to Snape, and if the man simply refused to see him, it wasn't like he could waltz into his office uninvited and expect a good reception. And he really needed to talk to Snape. Not so much about his lessons, which he *really needed*, by the way, but about the other day. No matter the eccentricities of the wizarding world, Harry was fairly sure a teacher-student snog still warranted a fair amount of discussion. Particularly when he was the student in question.

He was pretending to pay attention to his Charms essay when Ron walked into the common room, looking worried and snapping him out of a rather pleasant daydream.

'Want to come downstairs?'

'It's too early for dinner.' Harry groaned from the comfort of his cushioned armchair. Outside, it poured.

'It's almost six,' Ron reminded him quietly.

'Exactly. Too early for... oh.' He recalled, recognising the look on Ron's face. 'Ginny.'

'Please?'

Harry stretched, glancing at Dean from the corner of his eye. He was playing wizards' chess with Seamus. 'What on earth do you want to do? Rescue her...?'

'I don't... I just... I just want to see if...!' Ron fidgeted uncomfortably. 'She's my sister...!'

'We're not going to watch them, for Merlin's sake,' Harry gritted out nervously. Dean had turned to them at the sound of Ron's raised voice.

'We're not going to... It's just a second! Just to see if she's all right. Believe me, if they're doing any of that, I won't want to see it.' Ron made a face. 'Hermione's coming too. Come on, Harry!'

Harry looked at her. She sat by the fire, absently snapping out the petals of another rose. Crookshanks jumped about, trying to catch the petals as they fell.

'I... hadn't noticed her there, I thought she was...' Harry mumbled, his mood suddenly lifted.

'So you're coming? Great!' Ron pulled him off the chair and called Hermione discreetly.

They were quiet on the way to the corridor. Ron was distracted, Harry and Hermione a tad self-conscious. But for the first time in a few days, they were comfortable in each other's company, which alleviated the silence a bit.

But Ginny was nowhere to be seen, and they couldn't spot Malfoy anywhere. It was three to six, and the only person in the corridor was a girl whom Harry recognised from practice as the girlfriend of a Slytherin chaser. Although she often talked to the Gryffindors during meals, that was all Harry knew about her. She walked gracefully along the corridor, exchanging a few words with the paintings, who complimented her on her looks. She was, indeed, very pretty.

'Are you sure you heard them properly?' Hermione whispered. They nodded. 'Well, then, they're late. Maybe they called it off,' she suggested, patting Ron's shoulder.

'Yeah...!' Harry agreed. 'Let's get out of here. This girl must be waiting for someone, too.'

'Maybe they were early?' Ron countered, staring at the girl. Behind him hung a painting labelled, 'George killing the lion the Muggle view of the legend', and the lion leaned out to growl at him. The girl glanced around.

'Let's go,' Hermione commanded.

Already in the Great Hall, they did their best to lighten Ron's mood.

'Why would they even want to meet in a dark, damp corridor? Even Malfoy would have better taste.'

'Yeah, we were worrying ourselves over nothing,' added Harry, who had worried very little. 'Maybe Ginny's here, let's see if we can find her.'

'I'm sure I heard it right,' Ron insisted halfheartedly. 'You heard it too, Harry.'

'Okay,' Harry began provocatively. 'Maybe they *were* early, after all, and they moved to a cosier, warmer, un-damp room...?'

Ron whacked him across the head. Harry laughed out loud.

They couldn't find Ginny, but Malfoy was there, laughing with a few of his yearmates and not at all looking like someone who had called off a date.

'So much the better,' Ron commented as they joined their own mates. Hermione was still eyeing Malfoy suspiciously.

'You don't think he told Ginny to be there just so... you know, just so he could gloat, do you?' she whispered in Harry's ear. Ron discussed a brooms magazine with Seamus.

'I wouldn't put that beyond him,' Harry confessed, 'but what would the point be? Only we knew they were going to be there, none of those people were there... And Ginny isn't that naïf.'

Hermione's reply was drowned by another voice joining them. 'Wanted to see me, Potter?'

Harry jumped and his head almost collided with Hermione's.

'I hope this isn't a bad time,' Snape added smoothly, raising a brow at Hermione, who blushed as if on cue.

The chatter around them had died. Harry fumed inwardly. Of course Snape would want to talk to him in front of everyone.

'You need to resume my lessons,' he said flatly.

'Do I?'

'On the headmaster's orders,' Harry added angelically.

'He did inform you that I have no time to pat your head this week, didn't he?'

'Yes.' Harry looked up unwaveringly. 'And he also assured me that he would keep your schedule clearer from now on so that you can focus a bit on me.'

The choice of words was all his, of course. He had to suppress a smile at Snape's silent reaction. Weren't it for the copper plates, the man's glare could have drilled a hole into the table.

'Won't he ever stop spoiling you rotten?' The words had apparently left Snape's lips before he could stop them, judging by the way he looked around himself to check for their reactions.

'I don't know, sir, but while it lasts, I intend to profit from it.' Beside Harry, Hermione gasped. 'After all, I do need as many remedial lessons as I can get.'

'That, Potter, is quite undeniable. Compared to you, Longbottom is an expert brewer.' Snape smirked distastefully. 'Very well. Tomorrow, at six, in my office. And I suggest you save that smile for later. I haven't become more indulgent over the week. Miss Granger,' he said in the same breath, 'would you mind an early dinner tonight?'

She hastily followed him out of the Great Hall. That was enough to wipe the grin off Harry's face. The least said about Ron's face, the better.

'How Snape hasn't driven you both insane yet is beyond me,' Seamus piped in. 'And you even go looking for it--'

'Yeah, I don't get it either,' Ron admitted, his eyes shifting between the doors and Harry.

'Desperation, my friends, desperation.' Harry sighed, flipping through the magazine. 'I want to be an Auror. If I need to badger Snape for a chance... so be it.'

'Can you imagine, depending on Snape--for anything?' Dean grimaced.

'Yeah,' Harry replied, staring longingly at the doors. 'I can.'

As Harry daydreamed his way through breakfast, Malfoy and Ginny had the longest conversation in plain sight. Ron didn't pay them much attention, either because he thought Ginny was beyond redemption, or because his own conversation with Blaise was too engrossing. Talking with Blaise had apparently become acceptable now that he and Hermione had broken up. And Blaise, it seemed, was a bit of a connoisseur regarding Quidditch, although he had no interest in playing.

Harry thought that behind this blossoming civility was simply Blaise's desire to remain close to Hermione's friends, perhaps in the hope of a second chance. He couldn't really blame the bloke, he thought, readying to leave for class.

'Hand this to Granger, will you, Potter?' Malfoy requested, extending him a small, ornate book. 'She needs it for her part of our Ancient Runes essay, but I didn't have a chance to give it to her yesterday.'

'Why don't you give it to her yourself? Class begins in a minute.'

'And her bodyguard will be there. I don't need a row this early in the morning over a book. Do you mind...?' Malfoy said irritably.

'Sure,' Harry mumbled, shoving the book in his bag. He almost missed Malfoy's begrudging, 'Thanks.'

Hours later, back in the common room, everyone was chattering around him, while Harry tried, and failed miserably, not to think of what lay ahead, when an unbelievably loud argument broke out, snapping him back to reality.

'What's that?'

'Dean and Ginny,' Ron explained. 'They're in our dormitory. They've been there for ages!'

'Yeah, but I hadn't heard them until now.'

'They hadn't got loud until now,' Ron added.

'You're awfully calm!' scolded a worried Hermione. 'Listen to them! They've got their wands with them; they might hurt each other!'

'This has been brewing for weeks,' Ron snapped. 'Everybody noticed it. Except for you--you only had eyes for Zabini.'

'That's so unfair!'

'No, it's not!' Ron took a calming breath and looked at her seriously. 'It's not like you ought to notice it or anything. You've got nothing to do with this. But *that's* been brewing, and it *would* eventually come to this. And honestly? It couldn't come soon enough.'

'Are you insane?'

'It couldn't go on, okay!?' Ron snapped. 'She can date whomever she wants, not two at the time, or however many she has! It's not fair to Dean, it's not fair to her, it's not even fair to Malfoy, if she was enough of an idiot to fall for him. Let them argue. At least she'll have to make a choice and stick to it.'

'Are you aware of what you're saying?' Hermione asked, mouth agape. Ron stood defiantly before her, his arms crossed.

'I'm aware of what I see. If it's Malfoy she wants, let her have him. But let her do it properly.'

'You didn't tell Dean about yesterday, by any chance, did you?' she asked pointedly.

'That's what they're rowing about?' Harry looked up. 'A thing that didn't happen?'

'I didn't tell him anything,' Ron said, his ears reddening. 'Someone must have taken pity on him. I'll have to thank them.'

'So, as long as the man in the relationship comes out with his manhood unscathed, you don't even care about how your sister feels. It's so typical of you...!' Hermione nearly shouted.

'I care so much about how she feels that I lied to one of my best mates, for weeks, for her!' Ron shouted back. 'But, boy, am I glad someone else was more ballsy than me!'

Hermione's angry reply was on its way out when the door to the boys' dormitory was slammed open and Dean stormed out of the room without a word.

'Charming.' Hermione grimaced. 'Funny how you only disliked *my* boyfriend. Everyone else's is perfect even if--'

'Look, if you need to be told that he's fantastic and that you should never have left him, maybe you *deserved* to be dumped!'

Hermione was so furious that she couldn't even seem to find the words to answer him. Ginny's reappearance spared her the effort. As soon as she emerged from the dormitory and stalked over to Seamus, everyone pretended to be incredibly busy.

She looked terribly upset. 'When your friend sees how wrong he is, you might want to tell him that the moment for apologies went by two minutes ago.'

'Ginny...' Harry tried to reason.

She looked so out of it when her eyes rested on him that Harry had to resist the urge to reach for his wand. Surprisingly, she addressed Hermione.

'It was all because of you.' She didn't sound accusing, just resigned, and Harry had the frightening feeling she was going to cry. Hermione stared at her in stunned silence.

'And tell your friend,' Ginny shouted, now addressing Ron, who was as stunned as Hermione, 'that if he so much as looks at me the wrong way, I'll hex him!'

She turned on her heels and walked to the girls' dormitories with her head held high. The door closed behind her with a resounding *clang*. Hermione made to follow her, but Ron's hand on her shoulder pushed her back down onto her chair.

'Let her be.'

'Let me go! Just because you don't care...!'

'Let her be,' Ron repeated gravely. 'I know her. She needs to be on her own now.'

Hermione finally relented, crossing her arms and glaring sideways at Ron. Around them, the chatter had been resumed. Harry left for Occlumency in silence. It was best not to tell Hermione that he rather agreed with Ron's stance on this.

Harry took a deep breath before knocking on the door. When no sound issued from beyond, he proudly waited for two full seconds before opening it.

'You're early.'

'Only by five minutes, sir.' Harry stopped fiddling with the knob and turned to face his teacher, who stood against the shelves behind the desk, arms across his chest, one foot on the back of his chair. Harry imagined that Snape found the informal posture a small price to pay for getting the message across.

'I don't recall you ever being early for these lessons. You seemed to prefer skipping them,' Snape remarked silkily. Harry felt like a first year again. 'Why the sudden interest?'

Harry blinked. Did he not remember their previous, er, encounter?

'I need them, don't I?' He finally shrugged. Never had a leg propped on a chair looked so prohibitive.

'Have you had any new visions?'

Harry shook his head negatively.

'What could make you take an interest in Occlumency, then? A sudden urge to become a decent student?'

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched almost imperceptively. Was he making fun of... The words were out before Harry could stop them.

'I don't know, Professor, has something happened to make you care?'

Snape straightened up with a scowl. The lesson had begun. Five minutes and two falls later, Snape cast him an acid look. 'You made all that fuss over this lesson... for this?'

'I'm trying!' Harry retorted, trying with all his might to keep his eyes above Snape's shoulders.

'That... is trying? Potter, show yourself capable of doing something, anything, or leave me alone. Contrary to you, I'm very busy.'

'With Hermione?' Harry bit out.

Snape frowned. 'No, not with Miss Granger, although, now that you mention it, she *should* be here soon. As you can see, I can't afford to waste my time on you.'

'Dining with her--having all you meals with her isn't a waste of your time?'

'I should have imagined that a simple explanation wouldn't have cut it through your thick skull, but having my meals with Miss Granger is just another useless part of my work day. If it bothers you,' Snape added with a slight grimace, 'have a word with the headmaster about it, as you always do when your pride is injured.'

'Why don't *you* have a word with him, if you think it's useless?'

'Obviously, I already have, and even more obviously, it didn't work.'

'You needn't have accepted.'

'Will that be all?' Snape said irritably.

Harry paused for a second. 'Will we be resuming our lessons on a regular basis, sir?'

'Yes, sadly enough. Not in the next few days, but soon enough. I can barely reign in on my joy. Why?'

'People keep asking,' Harry explained absentmindedly.

'You *told* people about this?' Snape spat murderously.

'Just Ron and Hermione,' Harry clarified. 'And Dumbledore knows. Everyone else just thinks you're keeping me from attending practice.'

Snape's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he relaxed just a bit.

'So, I really need to know when the next lessons will be. So that I can at least justify my absences in advance.'

'You'll be pleased to know, then, that you won't be skipping your practice next week. '

'What?'

'I have no room in my schedule for these lessons,' Snape elaborated in a voice fit for dealing with the very dim. 'I might be able to arrange for one, perhaps two, during the week after that. Come November, we should be back to a regular schedule. Now, get out of my sight.'

'Two lessons?' Harry repeated without bothering to mask his disappointment. 'Why do I just *know* that you'll still find the time to have three meals a day with Hermione?'

'I'll have to find time for her even if I have to bribe that Time-turner out of Dumbledore, Potter.'

'Do you look her in the eye, at least?'

Snape actually did a double take at this. 'I don't recall hearing stories of spiked pumpkin juice today, Potter. Are you delirious?'

'You haven't looked me in the eye for days. Has Hermione had better luck?'

Snape stepped calmly in his direction. 'I seem to recall looking you in the eye just a minute ago, Potter. You ended up on all fours. Do you really want to do that again?'

He had indeed locked eyes with Harry as he spoke, and he was now so close that Harry had trouble focusing on the words rather than on the sound of his voice. Had there been more light in the room, he would surely be able to see himself reflected on Snape's pupils, so close were they. Judging by Snape's expression, he didn't cut an impressive figure.

'You kissed me.'

The words rang ominously in the squalid space between them. Harry's gaze didn't waver. This was, after all, what had brought him here, not a set of lessons in which he had always been hopeless. In the heavy, somber silence that followed, the narrowing of Snape's eyes was almost audible.

'You kissed me,' Harry repeated in a clearer voice. He was inches from Snape's cloak--it would be so easy to reach for him.

'Out,' Snape commanded hotly.

'No.'

For all his contention, Snape couldn't prevent his quickening breath from showing at such a short distance. He certainly couldn't stop Harry from noticing it.

I could just lean in, Harry told himself, his eyes travelling down Snape's face. It would be over before he even knew it

That wasn't quite what Harry had in mind, and yet the proximity gave the idea a decidedly alluring aura. He was an inch away, a second away.

And the tip of Snape's wand was resting against his chest.

'Get out.'

Now *Harry's* eyes drew thinner. He had no intention of running off like a scared child again. He grasped Snape's wand with a gesture that looked far more obscene than he intended and tilted it away from his own ribs.

'You're afraid of me.' He realised at last.

One of Snape's eyebrows shot up snarkily as he twisted his wand out of Harry's grasp and looked at it and then at Harry.

'Of course I am. Longbottom haunts me in my dreams, too. How well you know me *Out*.'

There was a loud rumble upstairs and the sound of approaching chatter. Harry ignored it completely, all of his attention focused on Snape's reaction.

Twirling his wand between two fingers, Snape let it come to rest idly on Harry's chest again. Momentarily worried for his integrity, Harry wondered if the heat that appeared to emanate from the tip was just his overworked imagination. The wand travelled up from his chest, catching in his collar and grazing his neck. When it slid across his chin to ghost over his cheek, Harry had to suppress the instinct to close his eyes. Finally, it pushed his messy fringe away and froze, atop his scar.

'This,' Snape asked, changing the subject shamelessly, 'has it been hurting?'

Utterly puzzled, Harry shook his head. Wand and hand retreated immediately, and again the desk was between them.

'Miss Granger should be on her way. Get out.'

The door opened on its own, inviting him to obey. Perhaps because the offhanded mention to Hermione had suddenly made it quite hard for him to breathe, Harry was out of the room and on his way to the Great Hall before his mind had a chance to register what the body was doing. The surreal conversation had taken over his thoughts. Every tense word, every calculated gesture indicated that Snape wasn't indifferent to him. Yet, he couldn't even get the man to admit that something had happened, let alone... *do it again?* Harry thought.

His foot was hovering on the first step to the Entrance Hall when Harry decided to go back downstairs for one last question.

Sirius' Shadow

Chapter 14 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

The look on Snape's face upon opening the door and seeing Harry rather than Hermione was remarkable. After a second of silence during which Harry was distracted by the fact that he had discarded his cloak, Snape raised an eyebrow enquiringly.

'Do I really haunt your dreams?'

Snape, who had raised a glass of water to his lips, lowered it again looking as though he didn't know what he had done to deserve this.

'Potter, I'm sure that the concept is, shall we say, alien to you, but I do have work to do. I have commitments that I must respect. So, if you will, please, leave me alone...?'

Suddenly aware that Snape *could* just shut the door in his face, Harry slipped into the room and closed it himself, fiddling with the knob as he had done before, trying to locate his misplaced courage. Snape had taken a step back with his head cocked in Harry's direction, but he didn't seem to have drawn his wand yet, which was somewhat

promising.

'Potter,' he repeated, 'I really have no time for whatever nonsense is going through your head now. Miss Granger should be on--'

'She's still in the Great Hall. Why are you so worried about her? She knows I'm here. She won't *mind* meeting me here. Why do you?'

'Ah, yes... this is all about you, isn't it?'

'Yes!' Harry snapped, turning around to face him. 'All about me. She'll sneeze and you'll care, but I'll be black and blue from Occlumency and you won't blink. You'll happily suffer the *burden* of chaperoning her, but you won't give me the lessons that Dumbledore *entrusted* you with--'

'--perhaps if you tried showing up for them...?' Snape suggested.

Harry went on, ignoring him. 'You'll do absolutely everything for her. I ask you absolutely *nothing*, and you still treat me like I'm some sort of criminal for having been born. Is it so odd that I want to know why I'm being treated this way?'

'I rather think I've been more lenient to you this year than ever before.'

Harry snorted humourlessly, the absurdity of the situation beginning to get to him. 'Oh. Yes. Very lenient. You even kissed me! You won't talk about it, you won't even bloody admit to it, but you kissed me. Will you at least tell me this? It's *your* wording--am I haunting your dreams?'

'Ignoring, for the moment, the fact that the question is ludicrous... Is this a pitiful attempt to pretend that I forced myself on you?'

'You're haunting mine...' Harry replied, sounding pathetic even to his own ears. *And I don't know what I'll do if it's all the same to you* he completed in his mind.

The moment in which the words sank in and slowly washed away the sneer, the cynical gaze, every supercilious trait that Harry identified with Snape, was simply memorable. So, this was what Snape looked like when he was in shock. His lips were parted, ever so slightly, as though he had meant to say something and the words had fled him. *He looks younger*, Harry thought absurdly, staring at his teacher's unusually blank face.

He would have to say something, eventually, but what? Taking back his words was unthinkable. Claiming to have a crush might land him in the hospital wing.

'You've seen into my mind,' he finally ventured.

Snape responded by blinking at him.

'You must know this isn't a prank,' he insisted weakly.

'Of course not,' Snape deadpanned in a murmur, turning to put down the glass on a nearby shelf. Harry barely heard him.

And now, what could he say? Everything that came to his mind sounded too ridiculous to be voiced, no matter how truthful.

'I...'

'I suppose this has been happening for a while,' Snape said offhandedly.

Harry blinked. 'Yes.'

'Since our lessons began?'

'Yes.'

An uncomfortable silence followed. Neither Harry nor Snape moved. Time might as well have stopped. And then Snape spoke, his voice low, but firm and clear in the silence.

'Then they must end.'

Time now seemed to be accelerating to make up for the pause. Harry almost felt dizzy hearing the distant, indifferent words.

'What?'

Snape's back was still turned to Harry, and he was muttering something that involved the phrase, 'old coot'.

'What do you mean, they must end?' Harry insisted.

With a gesture that indicated a deep breath was being taken, Snape finally turned around, his face now composed.

'We should have imagined that the... circumstances might lead to this. This new daily routine with my Slytherins, the fact that Miss Granger seems to have found new interests outside of your little group...'

Harry scowled. Here came Hermione again. At least this time Snape was grimacing.

'This would call for a period of adaptation at the best of times. Harry Potter, of course, wouldn't be content with a regular reaction.'

Harry's scowl deepened and he tried to reply. Snape cut him off. 'Yes, there are other elements to this. Your summer with the Muggles, the daily news regarding the Dark Lord's activities--and the subsequent scrutiny from everyone in this school, who are apparently still convinced a child can save them...'

'I'm not a child,' Harry snapped.

'Of course you are. As I was saying, under these conditions, it should have been a given that you'd feel drawn to anyone who gave you some semblance of safety. Due to our unfortunate circumstances, that person turned out to be me.'

'That's absurd...! I'm not--'

'In a manner of speaking, Potter. I'm, in essence, the only one teaching you something that might help you in that great battle to which everyone is so anxious to send you.'

The arrogance of the statement was such that Harry was momentarily speechless. Snape went on, unfazed. 'None of this, of course, would have happened if the headmaster had given you these lessons himself instead of passing you on to me. I'll talk to him about this. You're dismissed.'

Harry, who hadn't moved past the door, remained rooted to the spot.

'I'm in love with you.'

There they were, the dreaded words, without preamble, and he was still alive. Perhaps in face of Snape's ludicrous assumptions, the words had regained their true meaning, that of a simple statement of affection, rather than the confession of a dirty deed.

'Well, I'm not in love with you, so we might have a problem there,' Snape replied with an indifference that bordered on cruelty. Harry gulped discreetly before going on.

'And you're wrong. I'm not a child, I'm not trying to escape reality, and I have a pretty good grasp on my own feelings.'

'Doesn't every sixteen-year-old? At least until you've changed your minds.'

'I'm not a typical sixteen-year--'

'You're not a typical *anything*, Potter. And still, you're a sixteen-year-old *child* making a fuss over nothing.'

Harry closed his eyes and swallowed the urge to insult him. 'I'm in love with you. I don't know why it happened, but it did, and I'm not going to pretend it didn't just because you're uncomfortable with it.'

'Why, how brave and true to yourself you are,' Snape snarked. 'And what do you propose--that we face the world and elope?'

Somehow, the predictable fact that his feelings weren't reciprocated was easier to bear than seeing them cheapened in this fashion simply because of his age.

'I don't propose we do anything. I know how absurd this all sounds. I just... No-one cares that I'm sixteen when I'm facing Voldemort. You don't care that I'm sixteen when you're giving me grief because I'm my dad's son. I just think that I've earned some credibility when I say that I know how I feel,' Harry justified himself bitterly.

'And you're in love, are you?' Snape dragged out the words lazily.

'Yes,' Harry bit out, reddening madly, his eyes firmly set on his trainers.

'I can make you change your mind.'

The shift in Snape's tone made him raise his eyes. The urge to look away again was immediate. Harry pressed himself a bit further against the door, mesmerised by the unsettling smirk that danced on Snape's lips. Words dripped out of those lips in the smoothest, most caressing tone, as though Snape wanted them to sink in as slowly as possible.

'Tell me, what would your godfather think of this?'

A dark, secluded corner of Harry's mind knew that Sirius would eventually be mentioned. Yet, he wasn't ready for the chill that swept over him at Snape's quietly amused tone. He couldn't, wouldn't talk about Sirius. Not now. Not with Snape--not when he knew so well what Sirius would have thought.

'Sirius has nothing to do with this,' he managed to say in a carefully even voice.

'You see, I think he does,' Snape replied silkily. 'A month ago, in this same room, you accused me of killing him, and my very existence was obnoxious to you. Tonight, you say you love me. Was a mere month enough to make you forget him?'

Harry, who doubted that he could ever forget Sirius, eventually croaked out, 'I can't control this.'

'And this matters more to you than the memory of him?'

'I think he'd feel far more disrespected if I stopped living simply because he has.' A familiar lump was forming in Harry's throat. He didn't even know how the conversation had come this far. Snape gazed firmly at him as he searched for words.

'He wouldn't approve of you--of my--of this. I know that. But he's not here any more. And I... I am. I need to move on.'

'With the man who killed him?'

Harry thought that he had grasped Snape's point at last. Keeping his voice as calm as he could, he said, 'What happened to Sirius was... a fatality. I don't blame you--not any more. And I... I apologise for... the memory was still... I'm sorry I blamed you. I was distraught. It wasn't your fault--you couldn't know what he'd do.'

Saying it had been much harder than Harry had anticipated, but it was a relief to hear the words and know that he meant them. It didn't assuage the pain or the nostalgia that had gripped his memories of Sirius, but at least it appeared to ease their hold just a bit.

'Yes, I could.'

Something in the tone Snape used to utter these words made Harry frost over before he had completely assimilated them. Looking up, Harry no longer resisted the urge to take a step back. The door behind him hindered his moves, and he plastered himself to it so completely that he could almost imagine himself slipping out through the keyhole.

'I knew precisely what to say, what he would do, what would happen. What do you say to this?'

Mesmerised by the vicious parody of a smile that had crept onto Snape's lips, Harry could only murmur, 'You couldn't know.'

'/ couldn't know?' Snape's voice was now amused. 'I, who knew him so well, /, who knew he would sooner die than remain in that house, reminded at every step of his own uselessness?'

Leisurely, Snape approached Harry, his bestial smile clearer and harder to escape with every step. His breath grazed Harry's face when he spoke again.

'And, you know... I enjoyed it.'

Snape had seized Harry's wrists, pinning them to his sides and effectively forcing Harry to remain focused on him. It was a useless precaution. In spite of the bile rising in his throat, of the growing sense of peril, Snape's words held him still more surely than brute force possibly could.

Snape leaned in to whisper in his ear, in a mockery of a caress, and Harry had to close his eyes, a faint protection against the upcoming words.

'I relished the anticipation. I relished his reaction. I relished the countdown until news came from the Ministry of Magic.'

'What could he have done to you that you hated him so much?' Harry croaked out, a feeble attempt to cut through the barrage of reminders that he had always been right about Snape, that *everyone* had always been right about him.

Snape tilted his head to scan Harry's face, his voice casual for a moment. 'Will it make you feel better to know that we had a healthy, balanced relationship and that he hated me just as I hated him?'

No, Harry didn't feel better for it. He could barely breathe. He opened his eyes and the room swam. Something that resembled a gurgled groan left his lips.

'I'll let you go in a moment, Mr Potter,' Snape informed him silkily, though his grip on Harry's wrists was tighter still and he had leaned further in. 'One last word about how I felt about your godfather's passing. I told you how I felt about the anticipation. Well, it pains me to put the adage to rest, but the moment when it was confirmed...'

He paused for a brief moment. Harry's hands were curled in fists, but his arms hung limply, desensitized by the words.

'The anticipation couldn't possibly compare to the moment I knew that he was gone for good. That moment... was bliss.'

The last words had again been whispered in Harry's ear. He felt a bit like Snape had poured acid down the side of his head. In a fleeting moment of self-preservation, he considered running out of the room, but Snape's hands gripped him like a vice, his body was an inch from grinding against Harry's, and his calm, amused breath lingered against Harry's neck. The intimacy of the touch, undesired for once, kept him still. The thought that he might move and find himself in actual, full-body contact with the man was momentarily unbearable.

'Tell me,' Snape said silkily. 'Do you still love me now?'

Harry's throat was so constricted that it actually hurt. Even through his blurry eyes, he recognised in Snape's the maddened glint that he had seen only once before. In the Shrieking Shack when Snape had been about to hand Sirius over to the dementors for having been a foolish youth.

Snape must have read his mind. His grip on Harry tightened and his smile spread. Harry slumped slightly, his heavy eyelids dropping shut of their own accord.

'Look at me.'

Harry ignored him. He felt weak, not quite in charge of himself. Above all, he was painfully aware of the body holding him upright, and this once, it frightened him beyond all belief that he might open his eyes to find desire in Snape's. Desire born of nothing resembling attraction.

'Look at me!' Snape lashed out.

Harry made the mistake, the terrible mistake of obeying him. The room vanished before his eyes, and the space around him was instantly flooded with a horde of random images. The lump in his throat was acrid. He knew what awaited him.

'Can you really say that you're ready to move on?'

No... no, he couldn't. If only he could will that door shut, if only he could stop himself from entering that room...

'Can you bury your anger so callously?'

All those people... the spells... the daïs... its veil undulating delicately... eerily... alluringly...

'Can you bury your sorrow?'

The maddened woman fighting his godfather, each holding their own despite a decade of inaction...

'Your regret?'

The flash of light... The ultimate irony... Ambushed by criminals, killed by a maniac... in a fair duel. Because she had been more focused than Sirius.

'Your guilt?'

Sirius falling through the veil... to the sound of her manic laughter... Harry had hoped... If only Sirius had stayed at home...

'Or mine?'

The memory faded. Harry sat on his legs, trapped between Snape's taut, cruel smile and the wall.

'Can you?'

Harry looked up blankly, barely aware of the question.

'I thought not.' Snape sneered, walking away from him, leaving him alone, unsupported against the stone.

A deathly silence followed. For the first time since that night, it occurred to Harry that everything was unnaturally empty without Sirius. Without his laughter... his mood swings, his juvenile yet complete devotion to Harry, his voice... His laughter. He missed Sirius' laughter. He hadn't heard it often. A tear slipped from his eye and down his face, larger and wetter as it went. The first tear he shed for Sirius.

Sirius' joy when Harry told him that he wanted to live with him. The glimpse of the young, happy Sirius that Harry had recognised then. Sirius handing him the authorisation to go to Hogsmeade, welcoming him to Grimmauld Place, worrying over him during the Tournament, scolding him through the fire, racing to his aid in the Ministry...

He had been Sirius' reason to live. It didn't matter that it was partly because he was a reminder of James--he had been Sirius' very life since they had met. And now he would never see him again. Never hear him laugh. He had been his life and death... Sirius was dead... He would never again hear him laugh...

The piercing emotions that he had repressed for so long crowded in his chest, clenching his heart as they poured out all at once. Another tear followed the first. And a third.

He would never touch Sirius again. Would he remember his scent for long? Never see him walk excitedly around the house. Would he forget the sound of Sirius' voice? A silent sob joined the tears.

Never hear him speak again. A second sob. The tears ran freely over his blank, expressionless face. It was a scary sight. It was as though longing had taken on a bespectacled human form.

Never see him again. Never even have a grave to visit... His restraint broke, and Harry cried in earnest, feeling like never before the heavy, sad absence of Sirius. He missed him so much. He wished he could undo everything he had done last year. He wished he had never been born... Sirius would be alive...

He sat there, huddled on the floor, racked by convulsive sobbing until he felt he no longer had the strength to sob, nor tears to shed. Then he quieted down, breathing heavily, painfully, unshed tears brimming in his vacant eyes, an occasional hiccup still shaking his body. Sirius... Sirius would never laugh again... Harry wouldn't see him smile... He barely felt the tears as they fell again. He cried until his legs were numb and his knees ached. Dying of sadness might have been preferable.

Finally, *finally*, Snape took pity on him. He sat beside Harry, lifting his chin concernedly. Harry winced before noticing that the inhuman smile was gone. In fact, Snape no longer looked the least bit amused. It crossed Harry's mind that maybe Snape hadn't meant what he had said, but he had no energy to dwell on the thought. Forgoing articulate speech for the moment, he slumped forward, against his teacher's chest.

'Why?' he eventually whispered, although he didn't quite know what he was asking.

Snape didn't answer, but he gingerly put an arm around Harry to straighten his back.

When Hermione arrived for dinner, it was fortunate that the door didn't creak and that it opened just enough to allow her to see, without being seen, that Harry's tears were still nonchalantly wetting the front of Snape's robes. Hermione stayed put just long enough to make sure that Snape wasn't doing anything ungodly. Aware that she had intruded in a private moment, she stepped back silently and returned to the Great Hall.

Snape and Harry, however, only returned upstairs for the rehearsal. In the meantime, they did no more than what Hermione had seen. And as he walked upstairs, Harry could only try to wrap his mind around the one answer that Snape deigned give him in response to his pleas.

'You don't want a lover. You want a father. And I can't give you that.'

An Unpleasant Sight

Chapter 15 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

The next few days brought about quite a few significant events, yet in Harry's mind they were little more than a blur. He felt more detached from the daily reality than ever before.

The very night of his argument with Snape, and for the first time in quite a while, Hermione fell violently ill. Harry, of course, had rushed to her side, threatening to hex whomever tried to stop him. A few days later, Madam Pomfrey still gave him the evil eye because of the crowd he had brought along to the hospital wing.

His first, rather shameful, reaction, however, had been to silently thank her timely indisposition for drawing the general attention away from him. In the course of the two days that Hermione spent in the hospital wing, only half-conscious and delirious, his gratitude eventually developed into remorse.

On the morning of the third day, Harry and Ron visited Hermione before breakfast and nearly collided with Snape, who was on his way out and in a visible temper. They found Hermione on the verge of tears. After assuring Ron that Snape hadn't done anything to her, she explained succinctly that he was upset because she hadn't asked his permission before dining in the Great Hall.

They stared at her. 'What?!

She shrugged, snuggling under the duvet. Ron's face plainly said that he was coming up with his own theories.

Hermione was pensive. 'It's not like I could just--' One glance at Harry and she cut herself off. It took him a moment to realise what she had been about to say. She had been there. She had *seen* them, he thought with a chill. '--I couldn't interrupt the conversation just to go to the dungeons. Malfoy would never shut up about how I don't belong in polite company.'

'Why would Snape care?' Harry cut in, barely looking at her. She had seen him telling Snape everything that he refused to tell them...

'He just thought I should have let him know.'

'He doesn't own you,' Ron snapped, indignant.

'He's just trying to help me, Ron!'

'Sure he is,' he growled.

'How did he know you were awake?' Harry asked, spotting on the bedside table a book that he knew he had seen in Snape's office.

Hermione blinked at him. 'Madam Pomfrey told him, I suppose.'

'Madam Pomfrey never wanders about the school.'

Hermione flushed lightly. 'Well, she told me he comes here often to see how I'm doing.'

Mrs Weasley would never have allowed Ron to say half the words he was spouting now.

'It's no big deal, really!' Hermione looked at him, amazed. 'He's done it before!'

'Only for you...!' Harry said grudgingly. Misunderstanding him, Ron nodded fervently.

'Oh, you can't think...!' She inhaled deeply and glowered at them. 'If you came here to make a scene, you needn't have come at all. Professor Snape has been extremely kind, and he was worried about me. That is all.'

Harry was quiet from that point on. He wasn't sure he would have a polite answer to give if Hermione jumped in Snape's defence again.

The weather was dreadful during the next few days; matches kept being advanced and postponed, practice and classes rescheduled to the point where even kind Professor Flitwick was grumpy.

Snape's words had lingered in Harry's mind. He had considered almost every scenario, every reaction that could come if he ever lost his mind and shouted his feelings from the rooftop, but it had never occurred to him that Snape might think he was looking for a surrogate father. He was sure that there was nothing filial about his feelings for Snape, at least. More than just his brains agreed with him.

On the other hand... What if Snape was right? He had never been attracted to men before. But wouldn't it make more sense if he felt this way towards Lupin, then, or even Dumbledore? Had this happened simply because he and Snape had been spending so much time together lately?

Such musings invariably ended with Harry completely confused and terribly ashamed that he had even brought up the issue.

But then, there would be a Potions class, or a rehearsal, and it would be absurd that he had ever imagined that the thrill under his skin and the stirring that coursed through his body were manifestations of any sort of need for a father.

True, Snape was doing his best to discourage him, in the way that he knew would sting Harry the most. Even that day, when Harry had daydreamed instead of stirring the potion he was brewing with Pansy (and it had overboiled noisily down the side of their cauldron), Snape had simply flicked his wand over his shoulder and, in the blink of an eye, the cauldron was clean, Pansy was furious, and their Potions master's attention was on Hermione and Malfoy's potion. He hadn't so much as looked at Harry.

'Hasn't it been too long since your last lesson, Harry?' Hermione asked one afternoon in the common room. Harry looked around. They were alone.

'I was supposed to have one or two, one of these days, but Snape hasn't mentioned anything yet.'

'Thankfully,' Ron provided.

'You haven't forgot how much Harry needs them, have you?'

Ron met her glare with one of his own. 'These lessons are useless. He's still having nightmares.'

'Ron!'

'Sorry, mate, but it's true,' Ron said apologetically.

'You're still having nightmares?' Hermione asked worriedly.

'Sometimes,' Harry said quietly.

'All the time,' Ron corrected.

'And they're my private business!' He repeatedly poked Ron with a roll of parchment, which he then uncreased somewhat. 'I need to get this to McGonagall while she's in a good mood.'

They watched worriedly as he left.

'Why do you push him?' Ron rounded on Hermione. 'These lessons aren't doing him any good!'

'Well, I think they are!' She huffed.

'He's only got worse since the last one! He barely speaks, he doesn't eat... And you should have seen him the day after.'

'Oh, I'm sorry I was unconscious!' Hermione snapped. Ron paled. 'I'm sorry,' she added. 'I just... I really think he's getting better. Yes, he's quiet, but at least he's not aloof all the time...'

Ron nodded reluctantly, after a moment. 'I still don't like the part Snape is playing in this.'

Hermione raised a hand in defeat. 'Speaking of him... Do you want to accompany me downstairs?'

'Of course I do!'

'You and Harry don't have to shadow me all the time, you know?'

'Yep. We do it because we want to.'

'I'm starting to think you have a thing for Blaise,' she joked. 'Is this all an excuse to see him?'

Ron whacked the back of her head. 'I'm starting to think you have a thing for Snape!' He did a double take. 'Oh, wait, bad mental image...'

They bickered all the way to the dungeons.

On the last day of October, notices were put up on all message boards warning them that, exceptionally, there would be no rehearsal that night. The staff feared that the house-elves' widely-known Halloween feast might prove too heavy for physical exertions. Sleepy, lazy actors wouldn't do, Dumbledore explained over lunch, and just this once, a good night's rest might be more useful than a full-blown rehearsal.

But there was no rest to be had that night, at least for the Gryffindors. After the feast, they gathered in the common room to discuss the upcoming match against Ravenclaw. Sunday was likely to be a stormy day, but no-one was keen on the idea of postponing the match again. Hermione joined the discussion for a few minutes, before excusing herself and returning to the dungeons. Apparently, there was something she had to discuss with Blaise. Everyone was so focused on Quidditch that for once, no-one thought of going with her.

Around five in the morning, Harry silently made his next decision as the captain--daily discussions instead of all-nighters.

'What if we postpone it?' Ginny finally suggested, just as another bolt of lightning hit the grounds outside.

'Now?!' Dean snapped. 'It'll clash with the Ravenclaws' match with Slytherin. Of course, you'd be more focused on your precious--'

'What was that?!'

'Will you stop it, once and for all?' Harry shouted. They had bickered all night.

It was about a quarter to seven when they were finally done, their plans made and the match's date safe. They needed to rest. McGonagall would have a fit if she saw their living-dead faces.

Harry just sank more deeply in his chair, looking at the fire, which had dimmed now that there was only one person to warm.

'Do you have a moment to spare me, Potter?' came a disagreeable voice from behind him.

Harry turned around in time to see that a Slytherin badge, gleaming a foot below a sneer, had slid out from behind a curtain.

'Parkinson, you know non-Gryffindors can't be here, don't you?' Harry yawned.

Pansy sauntered her way to his side and leaned on the arm of his chair with a smile.

'Yes.'

'Then why are you--how did you even get here?' He frowned.

'I have my methods,' she sing-song. 'You know, our common room is much more comfortable than yours.'

'I'm sure you don't sit behind a curtain there.' He yawned again, looking at the fire and then at her. 'What're you doing here?'

'Thought we could talk.'

'At this time of the night?'

'Couldn't catch you alone earlier. You do talk a lot.'

'You were here all night?' He stared at her. 'Spying on us?'

Pansy sighed. 'You can untwist your knickers. I don't care for Quidditch. Besides, I took a nap--or two.'

'Then what do you want?'

'I told you. A word with you.'

'About...?'

'That meddling Mudblood friend of yours.'

Half a second hadn't elapsed and Harry's wand already rested between Pansy's eyes. 'I'm not in a good mood. What did you call her, again?'

Oddly enough, his reaction seemed to delight her. 'My, aren't we protective? Very well.' She slowly pushed his wand away from her skin. 'I recognise that this wasn't the best start. But she's in my way. I don't like it.'

'And I don't care. Don't call her that.'

'Please.' Pansy scowled at him. 'Like you don't want to wring her neck every now and then.'

Harry's wand arm returned to his lap, and he raised an eyebrow enquiringly.

'You want her away from the Slytherins,' she declared.

'I don't see your point.' And he didn't like the path this was taking.

'I'm not stupid. Let us speak plainly, shall we?'

Harry nodded. 'Please.'

'You want her to stay away from the Slytherins. So do I. Can't we help each other out?'

'I don't know if you've noticed, but there's an ongoing project that weirdly involves both our houses. I can't exactly prevent her from talking to any of you.' No matter how much he wished he could.

'I don't give a toss who she talks to, as long as she gets away from Draco!'

Harry blinked and crossed his legs. 'Oh?'

'Don't play the idiot,' Pansy snarled. 'You want her for yourself, don't you? I want Draco back. Do I need to make myself clearer?'

'Sorry, what?'

Pansy raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'You know, for someone who defeated You-Know-Who so many times, you're pretty thick. What exactly did you miss?'

'The part where Malfoy enters the conversation.'

It was Pansy's turn to look blankly at him. 'You can't be saying you didn't notice.'

'Notice what?!'

Pansy looked disbelieving. 'You haven't noticed that the Mu--*your friend* has been throwing herself at Draco ever since the Weasley girl finally left him alone? I thought everybody had noticed it! Blaise did!'

'Hermione... and Malfoy?' Harry repeated in confusion. And Pansy thought he had a crush on Hermione? The world was suddenly bright. 'And you want me to get Hermione out of the way so that you can have Malfoy back. Although he broke up with you.'

'/broke up with him, I'll have you know,' Pansy said proudly. 'I was... upset. But I can still make up for it. If you'll--'

'Good plan. You just overlooked two tiny details.'

She scowled. 'Which are...?'

'I don't betray my friends. If Hermione really wants Malfoy, I won't stand between them.'

'But...'

'Not even if I wanted to. Trust me, you've never seen Hermione mad. Secondly, I don't feel that way about Hermione.'

'You don't?'

'Sorry.'

'But then... The way you look at her...'

'Maybe I like working with you as much as you like working with us. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must go.'

Pansy looked up at him and Harry helped her up.

'If it makes you feel better... If you're right about Hermione and Malfoy, I'm rooting for you. You're a perfect match.' Actually, he really hoped Malfoy got married to

Hermione, or did something equally permanent with her, but that didn't make his words less true. 'You'll need somebody else's help, though, because I can't overemphasise how much I don't want to think about Malfoy's private life.'

Pansy stared at him as he ran to the door and looked back. 'Are you really sure about this?'

'Of course I am...' she said numbly. Harry ran to her and planted a kiss full on her lips.

'You can do better than him.'

She was still gazing at him with wide eyes when he ran out, shouting as he sprinted down the stairs, 'Don't let yourself be caught here, or you'll change your mind about us being a bunch of goody-two-shoes!'

The Fat Lady was grumpily remarking that nowadays' youth had no respect for the nightly rest of their elders and Harry was already well on his way to the dungeons. Only when he stood panting at the door to Snape's office did he think rationally and wonder if it was wise to bother the man so early in the morning.

His sleepy inner voice remarked that it would be shameful for a Gryffindor to sprint down the entire castle only to get cold feet now.

What was he going to say? He still had no answer for the questions Snape had raised the other day... But now he knew that Hermione hadn't been talking about Snape. He had been going mad with jealousy--the jealousy of a lover. It had to be better than nothing.

He quickly checked his crumpled school robes to make sure they weren't smelly or scandalously dirty and then knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

Harry knocked again. He couldn't be asleep still. It was almost time for breakfast, and surely the man had classes to prepare. Harry tugged at his robes, trying unsuccessfully to uncrease them, and knocked again. A thin gap appeared between wall and door, beyond which stood a rather surly teacher.

'What in the name of Merlin are you doing here?'

'I have to talk to you,' Harry said bluntly.

'No.'

'Please.'

'This is a terrible time. Come back lat--' Harry pushed his way inside the office and held his gaze firmly.

'Now. I promise I won't be long. There's something I need to tell you.'

'Then say it and begone,' Snape said briskly, opening the door wide to ease Harry's exit.

Just as Harry opened his mouth to speak, the sound of another door creaking open caught his attention. He instinctively looked around, trying to identify the source of the sound.

'Well?!' Snape said impatiently.

'I think I overslept... Late for breakfast...' came a sleepy voice from the same place as the creaking.

Harry's head whipped around just in time to see someone coming out of the darkness of a side wall. A sleepy, yawning figure, wrapped tightly in an overlarge cloak of Snape's came into view. Harry's heart momentarily stopped. Leaning against the doorframe, still unaware of his presence and yawning widely against the sleeve of Snape's cloak, was Hermione.

Uncontrollable

Chapter 16 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry's mind was blank as he observed Hermione's sleepy sigh and the limp hand she ran across her eyes. He was numb as she stiffened with the realisation that there was somebody else in the room--as her eyes widened upon settling on him, her hands wrapping the cloak more tightly around her body.

He turned to Snape, looking for who knows what reaction, before she had the chance to say anything. Snape's arms were crossed, his back straight, and from under a supercilious brow, he looked at Harry directly, defiantly, daring him to make a scene.

'Harry...' Hermione began.

'Don't,' Harry ordered almost inaudibly. The betrayal patent in his face was sure to be more effective than any words. She took a step in his direction, and he watched, as though it were another's body, as his hand, his tight fist slid towards her, uncurling into a spread, forbidding hand. Hermione looked pleadingly at him.

The feeling was somewhat similar to being unexpectedly bludgeoned. His head was light for a moment, but as it returned to normalcy the rest of his body prepared to scream its agony. Turning to Snape again, Harry rasped out through dry lips, 'I'm sorry. I should have waited.'

'I didn't know this was such a bad time,' he spat venomously towards Hermione. She looked crushed.

Making it to the door with as much dignity as he could muster, he made only a short pause when he walked by his impassive teacher. Looking up with an expression that spoke louder than any rant, he opened his mouth, but ultimately decided against saying anything.

He was rather proud that he managed to close the door with a polite click rather than with the resounding slam that briefly occurred to him. There was no point.

He had no idea if the corridors he crossed on his way out of the castle were empty or full. He knew that they were cold. Or perhaps he was. It was all the same, really. Reaching the grounds, he wandered aimlessly under the pouring rain, barely aware that it was drenching him to the bones. He had a vague notion that his chest might snap if he breathed in too deeply, but that was all.

The garden where Ginny and Malfoy had conspired was right there, half its charm gone now that there were no lovers within it. For a moment, he looked at the rain that pounded against the carefully groomed plants, recalling the day when he and Ron had come here to pick some flowers for Hermione. She had been so pleased with their thoughtfulness. He wondered if she was pleased now--now that they both knew the truth and Harry had walked out of her way by his own foot.

Hermione, sweet Hermione, whose conscience had been so heavy at the thought that her wandering eye might hurt Blaise, who had spurred Harry on so selflessly, who had had no qualms about spending the night in Snape's quarters at the first opportunity.

Perhaps this hadn't been the first time? She had been spending most of her time with Snape, after all--rehearsing with him, dining with him, having breakfast with him... Had she really been walking obediently downstairs for breakfast, or had she simply taken to sneaking to the dungeons in the middle of the night, protected by her perfect status, safeguarding her reputation, her dignity, in a way that Harry had completely failed to do?

The feeling of betrayal was overwhelming. Harry paused for a moment beside the ticklish bush, which was remarkably quiet. He had to catch his breath. He would eventually have to go back inside and face her, face Snape, face everyone who had been quicker to grasp the circumstances than he had. He would eventually need to calm down.

A dull ache unfurled smoothly in his chest, coating his insides with a frosty, biting sheen not unlike a dementor's. She hadn't really betrayed him. Harry had told her that he would do nothing. He had... he had wished her luck. Hermione had every right to sleep wherever she wanted, to come out dressed in whosever cloak she desired--well, not quite. Dumbledore would have something to say about ethics, and trust, and teacher-student relationships. For one vicious, deranged moment, Harry considered treating them with the same indifference that they had paid him and going to Dumbledore, telling him all about their--he sent a branch flying off a tree. Of course he wouldn't. He couldn't. What good would that possibly do them all?

Stopping in his tracks again, he had a sudden, insane urge to laugh. Here was the proof he needed that he wasn't looking for a father. He wouldn't have minded sharing a father. He shared Mr Weasley with seven other people. He shared Dumbledore with the entire school. Yet just the thought of sharing Snape was too bitter to consider. To think that he had doubted himself. But it didn't matter, did it? His potential need for a father had never been part of Snape's concerns, after all.

Snape could have told him. Snape should have told him before Harry found out on his own, Harry thought furiously, hyperventilating his way to the wall. Harry had been candid with him. Snape should have told him.

His rage against Snape receded into rage against Hermione before he could stop himself. His perfect friend, his friend of all times, whom he hated now, for taking away the one thing he really wanted, the one thing that mattered... Whom he wanted to break into tiny pieces, above all, for being the one Snape had chosen.

What does that say about me? Harry thought, hyperventilating noisily while he stared at the garden without really seeing it.

'I hope you don't intend to slide down the wall crying dramatically.'

Harry looked around for the source of the voice. Snape approached, glowering at him as though *Harry* had done something reproachful. Harry's ire reached a whole new level.

'Worse things than you have come into my life, and I didn't cry over them,' he snarled, amazed at the man's cheek.

'So, your plan is to sit there and soak to death.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Come back inside.'

'Leave me alone.'

'Come back inside, or I'll drag you by your feet,' Snape ordered in a tone that, in any other occasion, would have been too serious to be disobeyed.

Harry pointed his wand at him with an ease that should have been beyond his fidgety state. 'If you touch me, I'll hex you. Go away.'

Snape's glance at Harry's wand suggested that he was considering breaking it with his mind's will.

'You don't honestly expect me to leave you here after the poignant show you put on inside.'

Even under the biting, cold rain, Harry's face burned with the humiliating memory. 'I'm serious. Go away. Even breathing the same air as you makes me ill. Go away.'

'Don't be absurd,' Snape retorted, an edge of irritation lacing his voice. 'You're drenched. Come inside--Miss Granger is terribly--'

Harry cut him off with a harsh, cold laugh that was eerily reminiscent of a certain dark wizard's.

'Miss Granger? Is that what you call her? Does she call you Professor, too? Is that *youkink*?'

Snape seemed to be genuinely startled at this, but Harry paid him no attention. He laughed again, a jerky, uncontrollable laughter that barely gave him room to breathe.

'Or perhaps she's allowed to call you by your given name,' Harry suggested when he found his voice again. 'Is that how you do it?'

Had Harry been less focused on the rant that spilled out of his lips before his mind even strung the words together, he would have noticed that Snape's hand had disappeared under his cloak to close around his wand. As it was, even his teacher's stony face was of no matter to him.

'Is that how you charm the Slytherins into revering you? Was that how you charmed Dumbledore? Some of us are allowed the privilege of a first-name basis, some of us you kiss, some of us you grant a proper *shag*!' he shouted.

A millisecond later, a wand was prodding his throat. 'I don't know what you think gives you the right to make such accusations--'

'I saw you together!' Harry barked.

The pressure against his throat increased as Snape hissed, 'You saw nothing!'

'Sure, you were just playing chess.' Harry snorted. 'Did she get *yourrook*?'

Snape's wand lodged painfully against the nape of his neck.

'I hardly think you're the best person to lecture me on good behaviour, Potter--'

'--and you are?' Harry snipped. 'You and your high horse. Hermione and hers. And in the end, you're nothing but--' Snape's free hand joined his wand against Harry's

throat. 'Does the truth hurt?' Harry continued indifferently.

'She and I did absolutely nothing unbecoming. But if we had,' Snape barked cruelly, 'I don't see how it would be any of your business.'

Harry bravely ignored the wholly different pain that climbed up his throat at this. 'Perhaps not mine, but surely Dumbledore's. Isn't Hermione a child in his eyes?'

Snape narrowed his eyes at him. His hand slid up Harry's throat to wedge just under his jaw.

'Or doesn't Dumbledore care?' Harry went on blindly. 'She's a girl, so he doesn't mind?'

There was a pause of a second, in which both seemed to realise that Harry's speech was too unnatural to be brought on simply by a bruised ego. But Harry was too angry, too stung to consider a civilised conversation now. 'Is that why Dumbledore allows her in your quarters? She's your reward for stomaching me?'

He had crossed the line. Snape's wand dropped reluctantly from his neck, but his free hand tightened around Harry's throat, finger by finger, bringing tears to Harry's eyes that had very little to do with his mood. Inexplicably, he didn't even consider groping about for his own wand, and the one sentence he managed to rasp out was, 'Is this *Hermione's* kink?'

Snape leaned in, looming over him with an aversion that only enraged Harry further. 'If anything, Potter,' he growled cuttingly, 'and following your logic, I should be the one demanding to know why it is that you waste my time with these ridiculous scenes only to go upstairs and declare your love to the shy Miss Granger.'

'What?' Harry grunted. Did *everybody* think he had a thing for Hermione?

'For future notice, the library isn't the best place to make heartfelt confessions, particularly if you haven't checked that you really are alone,' Snape went on, getting so close to him that the ends of his lank hair brushed Harry's cheek with every breath.

Harry's oxygen-deprived brain needed a few seconds to understand what the man was going on about.

'You got it wrong,' he finally wheezed, his neck slipping out of Snape's grasp just a bit.

'Did I get it wrong when you kissed merrily away during a rehearsal for the lack of better things to do?'

'We were just--'

'I--don't--care,' Snape bit out. 'She's ill. And I'm merely doing what I can, what I *amtold*, to help her recover. If you really must play the offended beau, I suggest you look elsewhere for an escape goat. Or perhaps ask her to dole out her affections less liberally. I won't be involved in this sort of teenage powerplay. Am I clear?'

Snape's face hovered so close that Harry no longer felt any rain falling on him. The fact that they were both drenched to the skin, however, became clearer with every second.

'She came out of your room,' Harry pointed out in a flat voice.

'That doesn't concern you.'

'She was wearing your cloak,' Harry added caustically. 'Had it been laying about for her to wear? Or had she just taken it off you?' he suggested with a bitter grimace.

The glower Snape shot him should have been enough to scorch him, but Harry didn't have more than a moment to see it, the split second during which Snape's hand moved up from Harry's neck to grip his jaw tightly. The very next time he blinked, Snape was kissing him--if one could call that a kiss.

The thought of biting him occurred to Harry, but it was hard, so hard to fight against it when that small, yet vocal part of his mind was screaming that this was what he had wanted, what he had fantasised about for so long--it was here, it was literally in his hands...

He clutched Snape's head with both hands before he realised what he was doing, bringing him as close as he could, binding their mouths together as much as the laws of physics would allow. It hurt, it had to hurt, but this wasn't quite the moment for tenderness. Harry didn't complain when Snape's hand gripped the front of his robes so tightly that the collar of Harry's shirt bit into the back of his neck. Snape didn't complain when Harry clawed at his cloak with such energy that its edges, held by a frail clasp, began to tear.

No, instead he slid both hands down Harry's sides, slipping them under his clothes, just grazing the skin underneath, before closing them viciously on the underside of the fabric, nearly ripping it apart in his haste to touch all of Harry at once.

The frenzy couldn't have been more welcome. Harry breathed out his approval, a strangled groan that got lost in Snape's mouth before either had a chance to hear it. Crushed as he was against the wall, he didn't quite have the leverage to do most of what he thought he should, but he could at least touch Snape, and he did just that, sliding his own hands up Snape's legs, pulling him closer still. His hands moved of their own accord across the fabric, settling nonchalantly upwards when they ran out of thigh. Snape broke the kiss to gaze dangerously at Harry, who shot him a mischievous look as his hands slithered around Snape's waist, cupping his backside and making him slump against Harry.

They did eventually slide down the wall, perhaps even more dramatically than Snape had feared. They landed on the muddy grass with a muffled thud and twin groans, Snape straddling Harry in what was surely the most awkward position Harry had seen his Potions master. His large, billowy teaching robes were a welcome barrier between them and whoever happened to look their way from afar, but they were heavy with the rain, and they puddled around them soggily, providing very little protection if anybody decided to come closer. Harry grabbed him by the neck to kiss him again, without waiting for a reaction, and Snape's hand somehow worked through the sliver of space between them to pull at Harry's collar. Harry slid further down the wall, half-lying against the stone, his wet legs bent up, keeping Snape ensconced in his lap.

Harry would later wonder what they would have done if loud, disturbingly clear sounds hadn't forced them to break apart, but he had been toying with the buckle of Snape's belt, and Snape had made no move to stop him. Harry didn't quite move as the sounds came nearer still, shouts from beyond the wall, disembodied steps, the bark of a dog when the door to Hagrid's hut opened to let him out, the clattering on branches and dry leaves of two thestrals that approached the hut for food... It was time for breakfast. Hogwarts was waking up.

They broke apart somewhat reluctantly, their scalding breaths still mingled in the rain that kept pouring down on them. Snape inched back, and Harry extended his legs just enough to give him room to manoeuvre, yet not quite ready to see him walk away so soon. Snape's hands were fists now, set on the wet grass on either side of them, and his eyes were downcast, his back hunched forward. It appeared he was hating himself already for his loss of control--or perhaps he hated Harry, who refused to move and let a long moment pass before speaking.

'I need to know.'

Snape's fists were tighter, he noticed. The veins in them were beginning to protrude. Snape took a deep breath and looked up from under his scowl, just enough to meet Harry's eyes.

'I don't feel the same way as you, Potter.'

Again, the calm tone of one who really has nothing to hide, no need to search for words. And yet here they were, still tangled in one another, risking more than either was ready to lose.

'No,' Harry clarified, sliding from under him with some difficulty and standing against the wall, trying to look indifferent to the fact that Snape's eyes were level with his crotch. 'About what Hermione was doing in your rooms. I want to hear it from you.'

Snape, too, stood, taking his time before answering. 'Waiting for the curfew to be lifted. That's all.'

Harry quirked his eyebrows.

'I believe she had been with Mr Malfoy.'

Snape turned on his heel and left immediately after these words. Harry stayed, watching him walk away without looking back, without giving him the smallest hint that... Was this what awaited him? A stolen kiss in the dungeons, a furtive moment against the castle's wall, a random moment of frenzy elsewhere, as though this was shameful, wrong?

But this had happened. Maybe there was nothing else, but there was desire. It was real, it was raw, and clearly out of their control. And Harry had no interest in living a guilty, clandestine life simply because Snape just wouldn't admit that things had changed. He wasn't about to skulk about in the corridors, looking over his shoulder in fright that somebody might find them. That wasn't enough for him, it would never be enough.

He would have to find some way to convince Snape that it would never be enough for him, either.

But before, he owed his best friend a very heartfelt apology.

All She Asked of Him

Chapter 17 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Hermione had been waiting for him in the common room. Her head snapped in his direction when Harry, having eluded the boisterous crowd on its way to breakfast, closed the door behind himself. Still dripping more than his weight in raindrops, he gratefully noted that she was no longer wearing anything other than her school robes.

There was an infinitesimal pause during which she folded and unfolded her hands nervously and Harry's fringe dripped unceremoniously onto his eyes. Then they spoke in unison.

'Snape...?!'

'Malfoy...?!'

They anxiously scanned each other's face for reactions. Hermione eventually nodded timidly and was surprised at the grin that spread on Harry's face. He could barely believe the extent of his own relief.

'All along?'

She blushed deeply, twisting her hands. 'You're drenched,' she pointed out unnecessarily, turning her back to him. 'Shouldn't you--'

'Hermione.'

Her shoulders slumped at his tone. She walked over to the fireplace, gesturing for him to join her. 'Come sit here, at least. It's warmer.'

He obeyed, plopping down on the armchair beside hers. She looked at him expectantly.

'Snape,' she repeated. 'It was Snape?'

For the first time this year, she hadn't called him 'Professor'. And Harry couldn't help noticing the barely-disguised distaste in the way she was looking at him.

Harry sighed. Perhaps it was better to get Snape out of the way before even mentioning Malfoy. 'Yes, Hermione,' he coaxed patiently, 'what do you want to know?'

Her eyes shifted as she groped about for the right words. 'I would like to know..First, I would like to know... how serious this is.'

'Very.'

She nodded. 'When you said you had kissed, er, someone, you were talking about--Snape?'

'Yes.'

'Why, Harry?' she finally let out, her voice breaking on his name.

'I don't know,' he answered honestly. A short, yet heavy silence followed. 'But I'd like to know why you're making that face. You're the one who's been defending him all along.'

'Yes,' she wheezed, 'but I didn't think he would--he could--'

Harry didn't like her tone one bit. Someone who had woken up in a teacher's quarters had absolutely no business looking at him that way.

'Harry, he... he doesn't like you, he--'

'He's not very fond of me, no. But we already knew that.' Harry shrugged. Hermione caught a glimpse of the red marks on his neck through his disarrayed collar, and she visibly, physically, flinched.

'Harry, what has he done to you?' she pleaded, her bushy hair framing her face dramatically.

'Nothing,' Harry snapped. 'Nothing that I didn't want him to do.'

With her wide, tired eyes and her horrified expression, she looked so unattractive that Harry almost laughed at the thought that just a few minutes ago he had been jealous. Conveniently, he forgot that he, too, wasn't looking his best, and that it hadn't stopped Snape from doing anything.

'We just kissed, Hermione, that's all,' he clarified with a sigh.

'He's a *teacher*, Harry!' That detail seemed to disturb her almost as much as the identity of the teacher in question. 'Don't you see--'

'I see that, from your point of view, relationships with the Slytherins are only acceptable when they involve you,' Harry snapped. It was unfair, and it strayed sharply from the apology he had intended, but Hermione's reaction was becoming quite hard to absorb.

She started and then held her head high proudly. 'All I meant was that this would be a very complicated situation even if we weren't talking about Snape. As it is, I...' Her expression changed as another, apparently more shocking, thought occurred to her. 'Ron! He told me so many times--and I never believed him...!'

'Ron doesn't know what he's talking about,' Harry cut her off in a tone that he had never used in connection with their absent best friend. 'He doesn't even realise half the girls in the school could lie down to let him step on them.'

'But he was right about Snape, wasn't he?'

'He was *wrong*!' Harry shouted. A ghostly head appeared through the wall, gaping in startlement at them and disappearing immediately. Harry lowered his voice. 'He hasn't done anything to me. I wish he would. All he does is... make sure my hopes are never up.'

Something in his voice must have tickled Hermione's sympathy, for she tilted her head sadly and asked in a much gentler tone, 'You really like him...?'

Harry nodded.

'And he...? Does he know? What does he say about it?'

Harry suppressed a snort. 'You must know. You saw us on the day I told him.'

She stared at him in befuddlement for a long moment. And then her eyes widened in horror. This time Harry snorted.

'He won't even look at me. It's like everybody in the school is worthier of a glance, just a glance, than me.'

'Harry, it... it really is sensible on his part--that he--that he tries to...'

'It hurts,' Harry added flatly.

Hermione placed her hand over his wet one, squeezing gently to make sure he understood she wasn't accusing him. 'Is that why you've been snapping at me at odd times? You thought we were... having a fling or something?'

'I'm barely allowed to address him,' Harry clipped out bitterly, 'and you're allowed in his private quarters every day. What could I think?'

'Harry, he's never been less than utterly respectful to me.'

'I know,' he relented. 'I know, now. But you... This is completely pathetic, but you have a part of him that I'll never have. He treats you in a way that I know he'll never treat me, and it just...' Harry trailed off, silently cursing his wretched tone.

'The way he treats me really isn't--all right, he's gentle, and attentive, and it's not something we would expect from Snape, and I suppose that in itself is, well, special, but you wouldn't even blink if it were anybody else.'

'You're not helping,' Harry grumbled.

'I know.' Hermione smiled sadly. 'But I can't help feeling that it's best if nothing else happens. I... It's relieving to know that Professor Snape hasn't been playing with you, but... but, should this go further, I'm not at all sure that he'd be above doing it.'

Neither was Harry. Yet a shattered bit of his mind was much more inclined to be toyed with than to be discarded indifferently, as it had until that morning. Until that kiss that told him there was something in it for him. Something brief, something disastrous, perhaps, but something. Something to remember.

He couldn't tell Hermione that, though, so he switched to the other matter at hand.

'And speaking of unfortunate choices, how about you and Malfoy? How did he convince you to stay for the night?'

'I didn't spend the night with him!' she replied indignantly.

A cold tension crept into Harry's nerve-endings again. 'Snape said you had.'

She did a double take at his icy tone. 'Well... He didn't lie, but... He could have worded it in fifty better ways, if that's what he said.' She sighed deeply. 'But he was very helpful, so I mustn't complain.'

'Yes...?'

Hermione looked down, flushing deeply. 'I went downstairs to talk to Blaise, like I believe/ *told you*' she explained, marking the last three words clearly. 'He joined us. Somehow, they let me in their common room... And when Blaise went to bed, he stayed. We talked for a bit.'

'And...?' Harry droned in the same tone as before.

'And then it was horribly late and there was Quidditch practice, and I left. That's all,' she finished hastily. 'By the way, shouldn't you...?'

'It can wait. Where does Snape enter this story?'

Hermione sniffed. 'He heard me in the corridor, I think. I... I was so worried that I might be caught, or that you might see me, that he let me in. We talked a bit about tonight's rehearsal, and then... I was so tired,' she added pitifully. 'He let me sleep for a bit.'

'His cloak?'

'I was *cold*, Harry. I wasn't properly dressed for the dungeons. He lent it to me. I wasn't planning on letting anybody see me wearing it,' she explained, a shadow of her usual tone returning to her voice.

'Oh,' Harry said simply. Then his mind turned in a different direction. 'You were alone and you... talked? Until dawn?'

Hermione shrugged. 'Well, we... we had six years' worth of things to say. It was so... comfortable, so enriching...' She paused for a moment, lost in thought. 'But he didn't try anything, if that's what you're asking.'

'And you?'

Hermione flushed. 'I--I couldn't! I was in his common room! It would be so... decadent...!'

'He must be made of steel,' Harry commented offhandedly, now much readier to be generous with her current looks.

'Or perhaps he's more interested in Ginny?' she ventured.

'Pansy says he's absolutely not.'

Hermione blinked rapidly at him. 'Pansy?!'

'Long story,' Harry said dismissively. 'She's sure that he's got a thing for you.'

'And you... don't mind?' she asked hesitantly.

'It's not my bloodline he's insulted all these years.' Harry smirked. 'If you're comfortable with it... go ahead.'

Hermione smiled weakly. 'Your lips are turning blue, by the way.'

Harry stood. 'Besides, considering my preferences... I can't really criticise yours,' he pointed out.

She grasped his wrist. 'Harry... What are you going to do about Professor Snape?'

'I don't know,' Harry said after a long pause. 'Nothing that you'd approve of, apparently.'

Hermione gazed at him in extreme concern as he disappeared behind the door that led to the boys' dormitory.

As expected, Snape ignored him completely throughout the rehearsal. He no longer went out of his way to avoid Harry, which was probably a terrible sign, but Harry clung to it as a good omen. Seeing him with Hermione, albeit uncomfortable, was no longer the agony it had been.

Sometime during their next rehearsal, she and Malfoy made such a loud scene that everybody, even Snape, had stopped to look at them. They had been working on the *Ask of You* sequence, the love song, which Harry had thought would be easy work for the new, if clandestine, lovebirds.

Apparently not. After a half hour of bickering that ended in a scandalous show of mutual accusations, McGonagall dismissed them coolly, demanding, in a tone that simply defied them to think of disobeying her, that they didn't return before they were 'civilised and ready to work rather than upset everybody else with ridiculous tantrums.'

They glared at her, a first for Hermione, as they stomped through the barrier and into Bohemian territory. There, Dumbledore stuck his head out of a metal elephant to smile benevolently at them, but they walked on without noticing. Finally out of the Great Hall, they leant against opposite sides of the oak doors, glowering quietly.

'We're going to be here for a long time, aren't we?' Hermione sulked.

'Malfoy snorted derisively. 'Whose fault is it?'

'Yours!'

He looked like he had been about to answer but had ultimately decided against it. He sat on the stone steps and ran his hands through his hair. A long, heavy, sulking silence followed.

'Are you just going to sit there?'

He looked up, his hair standing on end. 'Want to go back in and face McGonagall's wrath?'

'Erm... I was just thinking we could... you know...*work*. I know it's a foreign concept for you, but--'

'Funny that you mention it. *I was working*, rather well, I have to say, until you had that preposterous fit and had us thrown from the room!'

'I had a fit?!'

'Oh, no, *I did*,' he snarked. 'You're right. Let's work. It's got to be more useful than this.'

She sniffed, concentrating with some difficulty. 'All right. From where we left off.'

'Huh, the shout or the accusation?'

She pursed her lips. 'Malfoy, just cue me.'

'What's the cue, again?' he grumbled to himself.

'Well, if you don't know it yet, you might as well give up.'

He appeared to be repressing the urge to hit her. 'For someone who's forgot her lines four times in half an hour, you're pretty snotty, aren't you? Here goes *No more talk of darkness, forget these--*'

'I only forgot my lines because your little stunts distracted me!'

'Wasn't that Potter distracting you?' he snapped. 'Seeing as you couldn't take your eyes off him and all?'

'I'd have kept my eyes on you if you were there!'

'I was!'

'With Ginny!'

'We were working!'

'Either that or you just can't keep it under control for more than five minutes!'

He gazed at her venomously. 'You don't know how close you are to seeing just how under control it is, Granger. Now, as I was saying. *I'm here, nothing can harm you...*'

Hermione snorted noisily. 'Sure.'

He swore loudly. 'Okay. Let's get this out of the way. I wasn't doing anything wrong--with Ginny or anybody else. Now, will you just say that you love me every waking moment and be done with it? I want to go back inside.'

'Oh, I'm sorry that I'm such bad company!' she shouted. The suits of armour in the corridor creaked, and all portraits turned in her direction, surprised to see that the model student was making a scene.

'I'm going for a walk,' Malfoy replied tiredly.

'Oh, are you?! While we're working?'

He leered at her and turned on his heel.

'Malfoy!'

'Don't even talk to me unless you really mean to work.' He was already on the second flight of stairs.

'Oh, this is...!' She ran up the stairs after him.

'Your cue, Granger!'

'*Promise me that all you say is true,*' she relented, feeling completely ridiculous when the passing ghosts stopped to look at her. 'Your turn!' she shouted in the silence, reaching the next flight of stairs and seeing no-one there.

He sang his own line from up above, and she swore inwardly, climbing faster to meet him. This went on through several floors until, at last, Hermione made one final turn and glimpsed him standing at the very top of the next flight of stairs, leaning against the railing, his back turned to her.

'All right, this is absurd.' She panted, climbing up to him. 'This is useless, we can't even work on the blocking--'

He turned to face her, looking so pale, so somber that the words caught in her throat. Her very first reaction, which she regretted instantly, was to look over her shoulder to see that she hadn't fallen in some sort of trap.

'There's nobody else,' he informed her quietly.

'Why are we here?' she whispered without understanding why. For all his brash demeanor, he looked more ill at ease than she had ever seen him. 'Malfoy?'

'Hermione,' he replied calmly. He had never addressed her by her first name. 'You missed your cue.'

'*Say the word and I will follow you...*' she parroted mechanically, only then realising, only then hazarding the thought that maybe... But this was too far-fetched, even for him...

An odd, understanding silence spread between them as she waited for the reply that never came.

'Malfoy...?'

He looked quite rigid. His voice was hoarse when it came.

'This is... very unusual for me,' he confessed, his eyes set on the patch of floor between them. He seemed to be choosing his words with great care. 'I've always been taught that... one shouldn't advertise one's feelings in public--unless you mean to brag about something.' He looked up with a faltering smile.

She nodded slowly.

'So, this is... as close as I'll probably get to--'

She placed a shushing finger on his lips--the first time she touched him, really touched him. It felt more intimate than any of the reluctant kisses they had shared during rehearsals.

'It doesn't have to be public for me to believe it,' she said simply. He smiled under her finger, his lips brushing it lightly. She withdrew it with a light flush. 'And you missed your cue.'

He breathed in sharply. '*Share each day with me, each night, each morning...*'

'*Say you love me,*' she replied. He didn't. Instead, he took her hand and placed it over his heart, looking solemnly down at it.

The air between them was thick. Any recollection of the following lines seemed to have fled them.

'Very good, children,' Nearly Headless Nick complimented them on his way to the library, three floors below them. 'I cannot wait to see you performing.'

'Are you in a hurry to go back downstairs?' Malfoy asked quietly, barely noticing the ghost floating past them. Hermione shook her head, turning pink. He then took her hand, walking slowly up and down the corridor.

The door to the Room of Requirement weaved out of the wall, awaiting them. Hermione started, looking at it questioningly.

'Ginny told me how to get in,' Malfoy explained. She huffed audibly, and the sound made him turn around to face her. 'She knew I wanted to bring you here. She was the only one who knew.'

The tenderness in her gaze at these words mystified him. Before either knew what had prompted them to do it, they had drawn each other close and kissed gently, tenderly, aware that now they had all the time in the world.

A wave of whistles and soft clapping broke them apart. They spun around to face what appeared to be every inhabitant of every portrait on that floor, perhaps even the whole school, smiling courteously at them. A few of the older ones gazed adoringly at them. Others sternly told off their strident neighbours, demanding that they respected the students' privacy.

Malfoy's face had turned so red that Hermione's pink cheeks looked composed in comparison.

'The door,' Hermione suggested quietly. He nodded stiffly, walking to it with his head hung low and Hermione's hand firmly enclosed in his. The door swung open to let

them pass.

'Ladies, gentlemen.' Malfoy turned to face their audience. 'I'm afraid our show is still a few weeks away.' With that, he and Hermione disappeared inside the room. In spite of the portraits' vocal protests, the door closed quite solidly behind them. Protected by the walls and the host of silencing charms that surrounded them, only Hermione and Malfoy really knew what happened inside the school's safest shelter.

The Matter With Ginny

Chapter 18 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Hermione and Malfoy, Harry noted, were remarkably subdued when they rejoined the group for dinner. They barely exchanged two words from then on, if one disregarded their lines.

Malfoy plastered himself to Ginny's side almost as soon as dinner was over, and earning mystified glances, they talked their way through the rehearsal, oblivious to all. They were still talking on the way up to the dormitories. Ron and Neville took Malfoy's place with the Slytherins.

Harry briefly entertained the thought of going with them, but he had no plausible excuse to make a detour to Snape's office, and he wanted to talk to Hermione. Trailing behind the others, he greeted her with a sheepish grin.

'Well?'

'Well, what?' she replied, the smallest of smiles tugging at her lips.

'Well?!' he repeated, as though it were self-explanatory.

'Is there anything tickling your curiosity, Mr Potter?' She smiled openly.

'Yeah,' he said bluntly. 'Did you...?'

'She cleared her throat, flushing deeply. 'Shh. He's looking at us.'

'And... That's it?' Harry gestured emphatically.

'What else do you want to know?' She covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a giggle.

A giggling Hermione was an extraordinary sight, Harry thought. 'Why is he with Ginny, then?'

Her smile faded and her shoulders slumped ever so slightly. 'Unfinished business, he said. I know I should trust him, but...'

Harry generously refrained from voicing his opinion on that matter. 'She hasn't shown any interest at all in him. They could just be talking.'

Hermione agreed absentmindedly.

'And I can always kill him,' he added casually. 'Oh, look, Ginny's gone.'

Indeed, Malfoy stood alone on The Slytherin Flight of Stairs. Harry winked at Hermione and hurried to catch up with Dean and Seamus.

It soon became clear that the relationship between two of the school's most fervent archenemies had changed. They met discreetly under the pretext of their demanding workload, and they pretended that Malfoy was acting as a bridge between the still uneasy Hermione and Blaise, but Hogwarts' population wasn't quite as thick as they made it out to be.

The blossoming affair wasn't a popular one, though. Blaise was dignifiedly uncomfortable, Ron and Pansy were rabid, and Harry couldn't pretend that he wasn't concerned, in spite of Hermione's surer stance. And somebody else seemed to disapprove of it--Snape constantly glared daggers in their direction. Harry fortunately couldn't overanalyse the reasons behind his distaste, for Ron's rants about the 'albino vulture' took up most of his free time.

Blaise, who oddly hadn't cut ties with them upon realising that Hermione had really moved on, was a welcome aid in improving Ron's mood. They talked about Quidditch for hours.

'You and Blaise seem to be very friendly now, Ron,' Hermione commented one day as they made their way to the common room.

'He's cool,' Ron replied somewhat laconically. He and Harry were still in shock at the amount of homework that McGonagall and Flitwick had assigned them.

'Funny that you should say that. You used to hate him...!' she added offhandedly.

'Rubbish. I never hated him.'

'Good, I don't need to bring my earmuffs in my bag any more,' Harry muttered, earning a whack on the back on his head and almost colliding with Hermione, who had frozen under the doorframe. Inside the common room sat another trio.

Dean leant against the sideboard, looking awfully sour, as the pair in front of him gestured emphatically with their backs to the door. They all looked around to face the newcomers.

'What are you doing here?' they asked in unison, their intonations differing wildly.

Malfoy raised a silent eyebrow at them.

'I invited him,' Ginny explained. Behind her, Dean snorted.

'Why?' Ron snapped as Hermione's brow furrowed.

'It's come to my attention,' Malfoy informed them smugly, 'that Ginny has been having a few problems on my account. I'm here to clarify things.'

'But we're done, now,' Dean added sulkily, sitting up.

'Sit,' Malfoy clipped out, pushing him down again.

'In case you haven't noticed, this is *my common room*, and you have no authority here,' Dean replied with a glower.

'You've been slandering me all over the school. I can do whatever I want,' Malfoy said coolly.

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. She had a quick look at Malfoy and silently retired to the girls' dormitories.

Ron remained rooted to the spot, glowering at Malfoy, who seemed more incensed now that Hermione had left.

'Where's the boys' dormitory?' Malfoy growled. Ginny pointed him in the right direction, and he left the common room dragging Dean by his tie.

'Ginny,' Harry said in a carefully blank tone, 'what's going on?'

'Why was Malfoy in our common room?' Ron added loudly. 'And why is he in our dormitory?!'

'He's just clearing up a few things with Dean,' Ginny said simply.

'So, what happened after all?' Harry asked before Ron had a chance to retort.

There was a short silence, broken only by Ron's impatient huff. Ginny sat on an armchair, pushing a cushion onto her lap. They too sat, looking at her expectantly.

'You'll have noticed that Dean broke up with me,' she finally began.

'We might have overheard something,' Harry pointed out with a shrug. Ginny smiled faintly at him, not at all bothered with his attempt at a joke.

'Because of Draco,' she added.

'We noticed,' Ron grumbled.

'But he had no reason for that.'

'Oh?'

'Because nothing ever happened between us.'

Harry had an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu. Both he and Ron eyed her sceptically.

Ginny rolled her eyes at their faces. 'In short, we were doing each other a favour. Draco wanted to break up with Pansy. I think the phrase he used was "to fucking get rid of her, already". And he wanted my help.'

'It... doesn't really take more than five minutes to break up with someone. And you don't usually need help...!' Harry frowned.

Ginny smirked. 'Do you really think that would have been enough for Pansy? No, I get his point. He wanted to do it in a way that *let* her to break up with him and... Well, you know that the Slytherins have all these twisted codes of honour. Apparently, if she were the one to take the initiative, she'd be too proud to go back on her word, or some such. So, my job was to plant the doubt in Pansy's mind. Basically, she had to believe that Draco and I were having an affair.' Harry and Ron's eyes widened. 'Don't ask. It wasn't *my* plan.'

'And none of the Slytherins could have done that?'

Ginny took her time answering this. 'I don't think they were as easy to blackmail as I was.'

'*What?!*' Ron bellowed, verging apoplexy.

'How could he blackmail you?' Harry hesitantly joined in.

'May I speak?' Ginny asked crossly. They quieted down.

'He didn't do anything, Ron, calm down,' she informed him dismissively. 'You still remember what happened in the Chamber of Secrets, don't you, Harry?'

He nodded. 'But the whole school knows what happened...'

'The whole school knows that I was kidnapped and that you faced You-Know-Who,' Ginny corrected him politely. 'They don't know the details.'

Her gaze was darker now and unfocused. Harry knew that she too couldn't quite remember what had happened to her.

'But you do,' she continued, snapping out of her reverie. 'And so does Draco. He always did.'

'And if you didn't help him, Dean would know, too.' Harry guessed. She nodded sombrely.

'That's why he broke up with you?' Ron snapped, apparently ready to kill both Dean and Malfoy.

'No,' she answered firmly. 'He broke up with me because he's a cretin. Draco didn't blackmail me at all. He skirted the issue once, but I talked him out of it.'

There was just a hint of pride in her voice. Ron gestured fiercely, prompting her to elaborate.

'I made him tell me why he wanted to break up with the one girl in this school who puts up with him, and then I convinced him that I would be much more useful to him if he helped me in return.'

'Helped you with what?'

'In hindsight, with a silly waste of time,' Ginny said testily. 'There's this girl. You might have seen her during Quidditch practice... She's dating one of the Slytherin Chasers... How can I put it? She... refused to understand that Dean had a girlfriend. And that the girlfriend in question doesn't really like to share.'

Harry had to suppress a chuckle. The blood ties between Ginny and Ron were suddenly patent.

'Anyway,' she went on, 'she's always surrounded. I never had the chance to as much as talk to her.' Harry recalled the giggling groups parading in the corridor. It hadn't occurred to him that that plague extended to Slytherin. 'So, Draco agreed to help me see her in private and to, er, have a little talk with her before I did. Believe it or not, the Slytherins actually tend to stay out of his way, so having him on my side was rather useful.'

They nodded their understanding, and she continued, 'And it worked. She finally left Dean alone. I think Draco might have, er, steered her attention elsewhere at some point, too.'

Harry suddenly recalled their cryptic meeting in the garden and the solitary girl in the corridor where Ginny was supposedly meeting Malfoy. He opened his mouth to comment on it, but a sharp prod on the back from Ron shut him up.

'But then,' Ginny went on acidly, 'Dean was convinced that something was going on between us. Complete nonsense, of course, given--' she quickly cut herself off.

'And posing next to Malfoy was all you had to do in return?' Harry asked pointedly.

'Well, there was something else,' she admitted reluctantly. 'It was nothing special, Ron. He just needed some advice.'

'About what?' he grumbled.

Ginny looked very seriously at him. 'I promised him I wouldn't tell until he let me. He's kept his word with me. I owe him that much.' With that, the matter was closed.

That very instant, Malfoy and Dean emerged from the boys' dormitories, both sullen but alive.

'Well, he doesn't think I'm the lowest life form on Earth any more,' Malfoy told Ginny without preamble. 'I hope this helped.'

'Thanks, Draco,' she replied quietly. 'But I don't think I'm terribly interested in the opinion of someone who claims to care for me but needs your word, of all people's, to actually *trust* me. I really just wanted to clear this up.'

'Well, that's not my department.' He shrugged as Dean fidgeted uncomfortably. Harry, who was quite familiar with insane jealousy, felt sorry for him. 'Where's your friend?'

'Hermione? Still in the dormitory,' Ginny informed him in a perfectly casual, friendly tone.

Harry picked up the book that he needed for his Charms essay and took pity on Dean, inviting him for a snack in the Great Hall.

'I'll meet you downstairs,' Ron mumbled, his eyes still trained on Ginny.

'Ron,' Ginny crossed her arms warningly, 'if you think Draco's going to...'

'I need to talk to you,' he said flatly. 'Alone.'

Harry and Dean exchanged glances and sprinted downstairs. Malfoy made his way to the girls' dormitories. Ginny wanted to warn him about the trap in the stairs, but Ron cut her off with a loud rant about a recent Quidditch match. She stared at him in confusion.

Ron stopped raving as soon as Malfoy disappeared beyond the door. With a large grin, he hugged her tightly. The sound of the stone steps moving smoothly to form a slide, the thud of a body against the floor was all the revenge he needed. Ron smiled into Ginny's shoulder and nuzzled her neck affectionately.

An Unexpected Departure

Chapter 19 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

'You look so gorgeous!' Lavender gushed.

'Now, stand still for a bit. I can't possibly be hurting you,' Parvati scolded.

'Tell that to your wand--and Lavender, I don't look gorgeous!' Harry snapped, wriggling out of their hands and bending over the table to finish his sketch.

'Yes, you do!' Lavender replied, trying to take off his glasses.

'Parvati, I won't be able to breathe in this, let alone sing.' Harry groaned. The tip of his quill had cracked against the parchment.

'Don't be absurd,' Parvati snapped, kneeling to fix the hem of his cloak. 'And stop fidgeting.'

A whistle came from the window. 'Aww, doesn't she look cute when she's angry?' Ron cooed.

'Shut up. I saw your face when these two loonies finished your costume. Have you got an extra quill?'

Ron's mouth snapped shut mid-whistle. 'Mine was horrendous. Yours isn't.'

Lavender glared at him. 'Well, thanks for that! Sew it yourself, next time.'

'I'm trying!' Harry stretched, catching Ron's quill mid-air.

'You're really choosy for someone who wore hand-me-downs all his life,' Ron pointed out.

'Another word and I'll talk them into handing you the first version of your costume,' Harry snapped, scowling.

It was the first week of December, and the Bohemians' performance was just a few days ahead. The Classics had been granted a week-long pause, so that the performers could have the Great Hall for themselves in order to check the technical aspects of the show. The exclusivity, of course, had thrown Hermione into a fit. Eventually, she stopped raving just long enough to let the teachers remind her that the Classics, too, would have the Great Hall all for themselves in the week prior to their performance, and she relented.

'See, Parvati?' Harry pointed at his sketch. 'This is what I need. Something that actually allows me to move without making me look like a mushroom.'

'But you look quite good...' Hermione commented quietly from the door, turning to Lavender. 'So, you finally laid your hands on him, did you?'

'Hermione, shut up,' Harry grumbled.

'I didn't make such a fuss over my costumes.'

'They didn't look like this,' he retorted. 'Parvati, look at this.'

Parvati obeyed with a scowl. 'We can't do that! It clashes with the scenery!'

'That's my goal!'

Hermione sighed, curling up on an armchair by the fire. Ron approached her. 'You all right?'

'I had a row with Draco, that's all.'

Ron was a second too slow in hiding his instinctive grin. Hermione caught it and glowered lava in his direction.

Ron looked uncomfortable. 'Sor--'

'Shut up. Come here,' she murmured venomously, making her way to the boys' dormitory.

Ron glanced at Harry for help, but Harry was in a fiery discussion with Lavender and didn't look his way.

'Do I have to drag you?' Hermione snapped, already at the door. Ron followed her grumpily.

Hermione stood by the window with her arms crossed and asked without preamble, 'Are you in love with me?'

Ron choked and coughed until he was crimson. 'What?!'

'Are you in love with me? It's a simple question. "Yes" or "No" will suffice.' She glared.

Ron sat on the edge of the bed facing her, pausing before answering, 'No, I don't think I am.' Even he sounded surprised to hear his own words.

Hermione scowled deeply. 'Then what is the matter with you?!'

'The matter with *me*?!' Ron snapped back. 'What's the matter with *you*?'

'With *me*?!'

'Malfoy, Hermione? Of all people?!'

She looked absolutely incredulous. 'How could that *possibly* be any of your business?!'

'It's Malfoy! Malfoy and you, waltzing up and down as if...'

'As if what?' she spat angrily. 'What's the matter with you? Can't you let me be happy?'

'You're not happy!' Ron shouted.

'That's for me to decide!' Hermione shouted back.

'You've been depressed all year, first because of Zabini, then because of this ferret. Harry kept going on about Snape, but I knew it was Malfoy you were thinking about. You think I'm stupid? You think I hadn't noticed?!'

'That is my problem--mine! You have no right to interfere in my decisions--'

'I haven't done anything!'

'You were foul when I was with Blaise. Now you're foul because I'm with Draco. What's he done to you?'

Ron's eyes widened in astonishment. 'What has *Malfoy* done?! Has he obliviated you already?!' he bellowed, standing to his full height.

'He's behaved since the start of the year, he's been civil, he's friends with Ginny, and he's even been polite to you!'

'Saint Malfoy...!'

'He's not a saint, he's... Don't change the subject! This is about you and your consummate incapacity to see me with any person who isn't you or Harry. Why don't you want me to be happy?!' she shrieked.

'I do!'

'No, you don't! You hate everyone who comes near me!'

'I just don't want to lose you!' he finally admitted. Caught off guard, she waited for him to elaborate, which he did in a low voice and his eyes set on the floor. 'You're our Hermione. Our girl. And all these people... They're taking you away from us.'

'Do you really think anybody could take me away from you?' she said in a timid voice, gulping visibly.

'Someone eventually will,' he said quietly, his ears very red and his eyes more downcast than ever. 'And until then, they're going to hurt you, like they've been doing so far.'

Hermione tilted his head up to face her. She had tears in her eyes, and her voice came out in a rasped murmur, 'If anybody hurts me irreversibly, it would be very comforting to know that I'd have someone to come back to...'

He wrapped a bushy lock of hair around his finger. 'You can always come back to me--to us. Any time you need.'

She whimpered silently. 'But until then, I can't sit still or hide for fear of being hurt. Perhaps I won't be hurt at all...?'

'With Malfoy?' he reminded her doubtfully.

'I like him,' she said quietly, but firmly. 'I can't help it.'

There was a pause of a second, and then Ron pulled her in for a tight hug, clearing his throat to disguise his own watery voice.

'I don't like this. I don't support you. And don't expect me to be friends with him,' he eventually warned her. 'But I won't boycott you. And I honestly wish you the best of luck.'

She nodded against his shoulder just as the door burst open.

'Where the devil is that... Whoa!' Harry's eyes widened at them. 'Sorry, I'll be right out!'

'Harry...!'

'No, really, *sorry*...' Harry retreated mockingly. 'I suppose you're not interested in Malfoy's gift, Hermione?'

'Gift?'

'In the common room. Ginny left it there for you.'

Ron disentangled himself from Hermione and sat back down. 'Were you looking for something?'

'My cloak.' Harry looked around. 'Parvati just doesn't understand what sort of swirl I want Firmin's robes to have--there it is!' He kneeled on the bed and tugged at his cloak, which was half tucked under Ron. 'Get up, Ron! So, that gift...?'

'Chuck it in the rubbish bin,' Ron offered. Hermione glowered at him. 'It was just a suggestion...'

'Did I say something inconvenient?' Harry looked from one to the other.

'No. Not at all,' Hermione said brightly. 'I'll take care of it. I'm expected downstairs, anyway.'

'Right. Dinner in the dungeons,' Harry griped. Ron snorted.

'Exactly,' she said dismissively. 'Are you coming? Downstairs, I mean.'

'Tell Parvati we'll be just a minute,' Harry requested cheerily, turning to Ron for a summary of their conversation as soon as the door closed behind her back.

Back in the common room, a thin, long paper box sat in the yet unlit fireplace, whereas on the table facing it a single pearly rose peeked from between the sheets of one of Hermione's books. Harry was quite sure that it hadn't been there minutes ago.

Hermione's mood didn't improve during the next few days, despite the shower of roses and notes that befell her. Both she and Malfoy were openly miserable, but none seemed ready to adapt to the other's principles. The only good thing to come out of this relationship, Harry thought, was that Hermione was now much more understanding regarding his feelings for a certain Slytherin.

'I told you this wouldn't work,' Hermione eventually commented, twirling another of Malfoy's flowery apologies between two fingers.

'At least you like each other,' Harry reminded her.

'That's apparently not enough,' she said pensively. 'He won't admit to it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm alone in this.' She sighed. 'I'm ready to face everybody's disapproval, everybody's reproaches... I argued with Ron, I made Blaise miserable, and he... he's ashamed of me! He refuses to present me as his official girlfriend!'

'Well, everybody's noticed it already,' Harry minimized.

'Yeah, everybody's noticed that the Malfoy heir has been having fun with the Mudblood,' she snapped.

'Don't say that--'

'It's true! That's exactly what it looks like, exactly how I feel.'

'You might want to lower your tone,' Ginny advised, joining them.

'I don't want this,' Hermione continued more discreetly. 'I can't be with someone who hates my friends and refuses to commit to me. I just can't.'

'You're both so stupid!' Harry blurted out in frustration.

'Forgive me?'

'You...!' Harry grabbed for words, aware that Ginny was fully concentrated on them. 'If I were in your place, I'd be thanking every great wizard for my good fortune, and you're squandering it. It's just... *Urgh!*'

'You do realise that you were one of the reasons we argued,' Hermione informed him.

Harry pulled at his own hair and groaned.

'I... I don't care! Everybody knows he doesn't like me...! As long as he likes you! Hermione...' he added seriously, 'don't you two dare use me as a pretext to avoid your own problems. Leave me out of this.'

'It's not a pretext,' she insisted. 'He really, really dislikes you.'

'I'll keep that in mind in case I ever have a crush on him.'

'He has a point,' Ginny commented.

'But it's not that simple!' Hermione groaned. 'It's not just about Harry... He just refuses to commit. Why do you think Parkinson's been so smug lately? She's knows that her

chances are rising again.'

'She couldn't be smug because McGonagall told her she's the best singer in the cast, could she?' Ginny pointed out. 'It's not like she's been bragging about it everywhere or anything.'

'There's Lavender. I need to talk to her.' Harry sat up. 'Seriously, Hermione, I know this is Malfoy, but really, what else does he have to do to prove that he wants to be with you?'

'Admit to it...' she murmured, watching Harry's retreating back.

'I didn't think Harry would be the one to obsess about the costumes...' Ginny commented.

'Hmm,' Hermione said pensively. 'Maybe it helps him take his mind off of things...'

'Do you mean... Sirius? Has he been talking to you about him?'

'Not really,' Hermione admitted. 'But it looks like he's coming to terms with it. I hope he is.'

'Back to Draco, then...' Ginny began. Hermione heaved a deep sigh. 'I promise I'll say my bit and leave you alone. I just... You're my friend. I want you to consider all the possibilities before--'

'Did he ask you to say that?' Hermione cut her off flatly.

'Sorry?'

'I'm not an idiot, Ginny. I know who told him about my favourite roses, about the subjects I would choose this year, about my problems with Blaise...'

'I only told him about the roses,' Ginny confessed. 'Charming them was his idea, though. Everything else he found out on his own.'

'Why did you do that?' Hermione asked weakly. 'It was so much easier to dislike him!'

'I've got nothing to do with that.' Ginny gestured significantly. 'This was all your doing. But really, what did you expect?! You knew from the beginning that he... isn't the sort that makes public displays of affection. You knew what you were getting into.'

'I don't need him to shout his affection from the rooftops!' Hermione said fiercely. 'I just need to know that he would be ready to do it if he had to. I need to be sure that he means what he tells me, that he's not ashamed of me. Sometimes I think that he might be afraid of his father, but that... that *thing* is in Azkaban, thankfully, so it can't be him. And if it is, what does it mean? That once his dad buys his way out of prison, as he's bound to do, everything goes back to what it was? I can't live like this!'

'His dad,' Ginny said thoughtfully.

'What about him?'

'He's not around any more, Hermione!' Ginny wheezed, squeezing her hands. 'Haven't you noticed how much he's changed *for you*, so that you could see him in a better light? Everything he was told since his birth, he shunned for you.'

'I don't follow,' Hermione confessed.

Ginny huffed. 'You don't think he suddenly fell for you last September, do you? I reckon he's been feeling this way for quite a while already, but he could only act on it now that his dad can't control him. Doesn't that tell you something about him?'

'That he's a coward?'

Ginny actually laughed. 'That his first priority was to pave the way for you to like him. He must love his dad, right? He hates Harry for sending him to prison, after all. And yet, as soon as his dad landed in a cell, he came after you. Not after revenge, or whatnot--after you. His first moment of freedom, so to speak, he used on you.'

'Hmm.' Hermione sounded doubtful.

'He didn't care about anybody's opinion when he asked me to help him get your attention,' Ginny reminded her.

Long after Ginny was gone, her words still rang on Hermione's ears. *His dad's not there any more...*

On the eve of the Bohemians' performance, Hermione unexpectedly arrived in the common room a few minutes before dinner.

'Shouldn't you be in the dungeons?' Ron asked.

'Not any more,' she said brightly. 'I've been released from further private dinners with the teachers.'

Harry's head snapped up from behind his script. 'Sorry?'

She smiled knowingly. 'Professor Snape allowed me to have regular meals with the rest of the school.'

Harry grinned. Ron was still very serious. 'Why?'

Hermione pulled a chair and sat next to them, making sure no-one overheard them. 'He found out what was wrong with me. He doesn't want me to say anything about it yet,' she added hastily, eyeing Ron's already open mouth.

'But... there's no problem? You won't be ill or something?'

She shook her head happily. 'It's been taken care of, he said. If I just follow a few strict instructions, there should be no problem. He gave me medicine, too, in case I need it.' She waved a handful of tiny phials in their faces.

'That's... that's great!' Ron grinned at last. 'Let's go give the good news to Ginny, then! She was so worried...'

'I'll meet you downstairs; I still have to check something for Ancient Runes.'

'You won't be long?'

'Not at all.' She winked.

'I'll wait for her,' Harry assured him. 'The later I have to face the horde of Bohemians downstairs, the better.'

'They're not that bad!' Hermione scolded.

'They're the enemy!' Ron shouted, already on his way out. 'Hurry up!

'You don't need to check anything for Ancient Runes, do you? I saw you handing in your essay today.'

Hermione shook her head and spoke gravely, 'I need to talk to you.'

'Is there anything wrong?'

'Professor Snape, he...!' Hermione looked over her shoulder. 'Well, he does think that it's safe for me to eat in the Great Hall now, but he released me mainly because... he's leaving.'

Harry stared at her. 'Who told you that?'

'He did. I *had* to ask him,' she emphasised. 'He'd told me he intended for me to have my meals with him until the end of the term, so I had to ask...'

Harry barely heard her rushed words. 'What did he say, Hermione?! Where's he going? For how long? *Why*?'

She winced when he whispered the last word. 'Just for a few days, he said. He's leaving right after our class on Tuesday. He... he intends to be back before our performance. Harry, I... I really didn't like his tone.'

'You think this has something to do with the Order?'

'He didn't exactly give me the details,' she pointed out. 'He really insisted that I work with you this week, though. I--I... I'm not at all sure he himself thinks he'll be back on time.'

'Or at all,' Harry finished for her. 'That's what you mean, isn't it?'

She nodded quietly. Harry gazed at her in silence, the full meaning of the words sinking in slowly.

'Harry, I shouldn't even be telling you. He made me promise I wouldn't... I just... I just think that you should at least have a chance to talk to him before he goes. This matters more to you than anybody else, really.' The very words seemed to pain her. 'Don't do that! Sit back down and listen to me,' she ordered hotly, grabbing his arm. Harry had been about to dash downstairs.

'He's... He might die,' Harry let out through gritted teeth. 'He wasn't even going to tell me!'

'I know, that's why I did. Harry, I don't think he really knows how much this means to you--'

'Yes, he does,' Harry growled. 'He enjoys it.'

'Don't say that. Listen... Tomorrow will be chaotic, and after the performance... he'll probably be readying to leave, and it'll be a terrible time. So, if you want to talk to him, it has to be tonight.'

'I know. Let go of me.'

'Listen! He's in the Great Hall for dinner; there's no use in running to the dungeons and alerting everyone. Come downstairs, have dinner with us, leave before the dessert is sent up or something. Take advantage of that mess the first years make when they're leaving for the dormitories, and then go to him. He never stays for dessert, anyway.'

Harry nodded absently. 'That makes sense.'

'Of course it does. I'm going downstairs now. You stay here, calm down, have a shower, and then come down, too. Please, don't do anything suspicious, Harry! This is bad enough as it is.'

'What do I care?!'

'You should!' she snapped in a low tone. 'How do you think Dumbledore will react if he suspects, even for a moment, that you... All his fondness of you wouldn't help you there, Harry. You must be careful.' She lifted his chin and inspected him from head to toe. 'And change.'

'I... always do that after showering, Hermione,' he replied hesitantly.

'No. Change into the clothes I laid out on your bed.'

'Excuse me?'

'I took the liberty of making a few, just a few adaptations on a few, *just a few*, of your clothes. Nothing extravagant, I just fitted them a bit, changed their colour...' she added hastily, as his eyes widened.

'You messed with my clothes?'

'I think you'll rather like them,' she said dismissively. 'Come on, Harry, we both know you're not going there just to bid him good night... You can at least try to look your best.'

'When did you do that?'

'The other day during your Quidditch practice. In case something like this happened.'

'I thought you were disgusted with us...?'

'I can't deny that the situation nauseates me a bit...' she confessed. 'And just the thought that I might be helping you to get into something horrible...' Her voice trailed off, and she had to clear her voice twice. 'But you're not a child. This was your decision, and it's my role as your friend to support you as well as I can, as you've supported me.'

Harry had a gripping urge to hug her, but something about her air told him it was best not to try it.

Shortly later, Harry had to scramble through the large amounts of Bohemian paraphernalia to get to the empty seat beside Ron. Hermione, Ron told him, had left with Malfoy.

It must have been a terribly long conversation since they were halfway through the meal when the pair returned. Both their houses quieted down abruptly to look at them, quickly followed by the excited Bohemians and then the staff table.

Hermione and Malfoy stood quite still as the doors to the Entrance Hall closed behind them and then slowly approached their own table, hand in hand, looking defiantly

ahead. There were a few slack jaws around Harry.

There was an awkward moment when they realised that there was only one empty seat next to Harry and Ron, and another next to Crabbe and Goyle, but Ginny, who sat next to Ron, stood and quietly joined the Slytherins. Malfoy and Hermione exchanged glances and made their way to the empty seats. Hermione was careful enough to sit next to Ron, and Malfoy sat beside her. After a few minutes of stunned silence, the chatter resumed. Harry noticed that Hermione had subtly swapped her full plate for an empty one, which she tapped with her wand so that it filled individually. He would have to ask her why, sometime.

Following Hermione's advice, Harry discreetly left just a moment after Snape, shortly before dessert, telling Ron that he was going to wait for Dumbledore in his office for a short talk concerning his Occlumency lessons. The moment he set foot out of the Great Hall, he sprinted through corridors and down flights of stairs, making only a quick detour to the kitchens before reaching the dungeons. Soon, he was panting heavily outside Snape's office, balancing a tremendous tray at the same time that he tried to see if he looked presentable. He breathed in deeply and knocked.

When the door opened, all the questions that had orderly queued up in his mind fled him at the sight of Snape's decidedly aggravated countenance. Only one word occurred to him.

'Coffee?'

Something about Hermione

Chapter 20 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

That had certainly been unexpected. For the briefest moment Snape's eyes widened, and he said nothing. Harry took the chance to slip, or hobble, into the room.

'Coffee?!' Snape repeated, looking at him quizzically.

'Yes,' Harry panted, setting the tray down on Snape's desk. 'It's fresh.'

'Potter, what in the name of all the gods are you doing here?'

'We need to talk.'

'Do we?'

'You're leaving. And you weren't going to tell me. Yeah, we need to talk,' Harry said bitterly.

'I see,' Snape replied in a low tone. 'I should have imagined Miss Granger's notion of discretion would differ from mine.'

'She was just worried about me.'

'Then she should have kept her mouth shut.'

'Why weren't you going to tell me?'

'I didn't know I should,' Snape said in mock perplexity.

'I'm serious.'

'You'll note that I'm not keen on advertising my departure. Will that be all?'

'You told *her*,' Harry mumbled bitterly. 'And you only released her from your private meals on the eve of your departure. Why was that?'

'Do you want us to resume the meals once I'm back? That can be arranged,' Snape snarked.

'Why do you keep doing with her all the things that you should be doing with me?'

'That's too pathetic, even for you. I should be doing *nothing* with you. And what I do with her is strictly professional. I believe we've already broached this matter.'

'Then why did you release her from the private meals?'

'She doesn't need them any more.'

'Did you find out what was wrong with her?'

'Oh, she didn't tell you? I thought she might have, considering her cavalier treatment of other people's business.'

'No. She didn't tell me. Is there any reason for this? Something inappropriate, perhaps?'

Snape walked up to the open door. 'I have no patience for this sort of behaviour. If you really must discuss Miss Granger's health, do it with her.'

'Did you find out anything at all?' Harry bit out. 'Or was all that just an excuse to grope her?'

Snape crossed the room to face him with a fixed gaze that could shatter glass. 'I'll have you know that I correctly identified every last one of her symptoms within five minutes of setting eyes on her. And if you really must know, she was being poisoned. Slowly, but steadily. Now that we have found the culprit, she no longer needs special treatment. Will that be all?'

For the first time that evening, Harry forgot about his own interests. An abnormal chill crawled under his skin.

'Poisoned...? But... how? When? By whom?'

'By placing toxic concoctions in her food, during her meals--and by one of your year mates,' Snape deadpanned. 'Now, if you'll excuse me...'

'And why didn't anybody do anything about it?' Harry snapped in outrage.

'Because we didn't know who was doing it,' Snape replied in the same tone.

Harry sat down, absorbing the information. 'Who was it?'

'That's none of your concern.'

'She's my friend!'

'If I tell you, tomorrow the person will be dead and you'll be in Azkaban, Boy-Who-Lived or not.'

Harry sighed heavily. 'Why would anyone--'

'There is speculation among the staff that the culprit was displeased to see that a Muggle-born had been granted the lead in your performance.'

'The--this was all about--' Harry couldn't even calm down enough to speak.

'This is mere speculation. I personally believe that the culprit didn't enjoy Miss Granger's recent intimacy with my Slytherins. As it turns out,' Snape smirked, 'she's become rather, shall we say, *popular* among them. Interhouse companionship isn't appreciated by all.'

Harry's head spun. 'And I suppose the poison, or whatever it was, came from your personal stores?'

'From Professor Sprout's greenhouses, which have been attacked again and again this year. In fact, had it not been for Miss Granger's impromptu dinner upstairs on that night that you surely recall, we wouldn't have connected the two. It's a sadly recurrent plague, that of students raiding the staff's personal property.'

'Right.' Harry cleared his throat. 'And Parkinson? Is she going to be expelled?'

'Miss Parkinson? She had nothing to do with it.'

'Oh?'

'No. It was somebody else.'

'And you aren't going to tell me who it is?'

'No. He's going to be properly punished in due time.'

'But not expelled? He tried to kill Hermione!'

'He just wanted her out of the play,' Snape said tiredly. 'And he's part of a number of work groups. We're not going to jeopardise his colleagues' work. Miss Granger knows this, and she understands. Now, if that will be *all*...' He held the door wide open, making a significant gesture.

Harry walked slowly to the door where he stood calmly, facing Snape.

'You might want to close the door.'

Snape raised an enquiring eyebrow.

'I have no intention of leaving this room before dawn,' Harry said flatly. The words reverberated between them.

'Get out of my sight, Potter.'

'No.'

'Are you out of your mind?!'

'I must be. Just the thought that I *love* someone who still toasts Sirius' death makes me queasy--but I think it says more about me than it does about you. Shut up,' Harry snapped because Snape's lips had moved, and he had to say this before his nerve deserted him again. 'I know exactly how he'd feel. He'd want to ship me to St Mungo's. But he's not here, and it's not your fault,' he ground out through gritted teeth, a familiar lump forming in his throat. 'I know it's not. Dumbledore was right. He was an adult, he knew what he was doing--I can't blame others for the fact that Sirius wasn't perfect.'

'You could be my son.' Snape's eyes were narrowed, his voice much lower than his usual tone.

Harry's very blood boiled. He took a step forward, almost, *almost* brushing the front of Snape's robes, to push the door, which slammed shut. Before Snape could move, Harry reached out and gripped his face with both hands, leaning so far in that he was almost speaking directly into Snape's mouth.

'But I'm not. And I'm not him. Look at me. I'm not my dad. I'm nothing like him, *nothing*. Even Sirius said so, and he wished I was like him. I'm not my dad. I shouldn't be paying for what he did to you.'

'I can't look at you without seeing him,' Snape said coolly, rigidly, leaning back to distance his mouth from Harry's.

'You can,' Harry gritted out, grasping Snape's stiff wrists, running Snape's hands over himself. 'You want me. *You want me*. Did you want my dad, too?'

He had the disquieting feeling that if the situation weren't so tense, Snape might have laughed. 'I must say that this particular feeling never crossed my mind whenever I met with your father.'

'Well...' Harry added gravely. 'That's one problem solved.'

'There are so many more,' Snape mused, trying to twist his hands out of Harry's vice-like grip. 'And you're so young to understand them all--'

'Enough about that,' Harry snapped. 'We've been through this. You're the first to disregard my age when it matters. No-one would even remember how old I am if there weren't celebrations of Voldemort's demise every year. Enough.'

'This isn't what you're looking for.'

'This is *precisely* what I'm looking for,' Harry corrected him in desperation, pinning their hands together between their bodies. 'Something to remember. Something other

than a kiss that I stole and another that you just used as punishment.'

'You want a memory of me,' Snape droned sarcastically. 'A nice memory. You don't know what you're asking for.'

Harry gripped his wrists more tightly and gulped, blinking away the tears that had absurdly risen to his eyes. A short silence followed.

'I'm asking for anything that you might want to give me,' Harry finally said. Something in his tone must have awakened an untapped portion of Snape's mind, for the tension in the room reached an intimidating new level. Snape no longer fought his grip.

'I'm not a gentle lover,' Snape pointed out after an eternity had elapsed.

'I didn't expect you to be.'

Snape's eyes roamed Harry's face at these words, settling on his eyes. 'And once you have your precious memory, will you stop haunting me?'

Harry nodded with his lips pursed, moving closer still. 'I promise.'

'He promises...' Snape echoed absentmindedly. The very tip of his wand tilted towards the wall, and the hidden door ground open to let them in.

Harry took a deep breath, and they walked silently towards it and into Snape's private chambers.

Quick A/N: As you can imagine, there shall be no furthering of the plot in the next chapter. It's Harry's happy moment--let the poor boy have it.

Just One Night

Chapter 21 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Snape kept the door open while Harry had an absentminded look around, stepping aside when Harry turned to face him. Beside him, the door gaped open. The office beyond it was witheringly dark.

'If you're entertaining any thoughts of leaving, this is your chance to do it. You won't be given another one.'

Harry fastened his gaze on Snape's calmly, drew his wand and pointed it at the door, which closed with a resounding slam. He flung the wand to the bedside table, waited for silence to set in again, and only then did he sit on the edge of the bed, observing as Snape turned to ward the entrance.

Harry waited patiently, wondering if he would know what he was expected to do. He wasn't exactly knowledgeable in this area after all. Perhaps he should tell Snape? Did people say this sort of thing in these situations?

He ultimately decided against it. He was a Gryffindor. If everybody else survived this, so would he. The clatter of Snape's wand as it was carefully set on the sideboard snapped him out of his reverie.

'Any reference to my status in this school, any word that even remotely reminisces of it, and you will be back in your own dormitory in such pain that physical activity will put you off for a long time,' Snape informed him plainly, his back turned to Harry.

'Very well,' Harry agreed, a bold smile creeping onto his lips. 'Are you just going to stand there... Severus?'

The word felt foreign on his lips, but there was nothing else Harry could call him, nothing else he wanted to call him. Hardly anybody called him Severus. Harry wanted to be part of that select group.

And even so, time seemed to have come to an unbearable stop as he waited for Snape's *Severus'* reaction. It took him such a long time to move that when the teaching robes slowly slid from his shoulders, Harry's first thought was that it had been a trick of the mind, provoked by his fixed gaze.

When the man finally turned to look at him, Harry was momentarily reminded of the fact that he was a Death Eater, that they were in a warded, secluded room, and that there were decades of hatred between them. Perhaps it had been unwise to surrender his wand so soon.

Severus gestured subtly and Harry forgot about these concerns. He lay down somewhat rigidly, kicking off his shoes as quietly as he could on the way. Snape approached. Harry rolled over instinctively, resting his head on his arms, and silence followed. The only sound reaching Harry's ears was that of his own breath echoing in the hollow space between his arms. Then there were footsteps. Snape was pacing around the bed, taking in the sight.

Harry breathed in deeply, impatiently. A touch finally came, a light, negligent running of fingertips across the back of his legs, running up his thighs, reaching the small of his back in a flutter so slight that it was almost nonexistent. Harry shut his eyes, focusing on it. But then it was gone, and fingers wrapped firmly around his heels, sliding him down the bed, stopping only when his legs and knees sat on the floor.

Harry gripped the bed linen, which too, had slid down, wrinkling uncomfortably under him. A leg had insinuated itself between his, and he half-expected some sort of brutal turn of events, but it was out of his hands now. It was a surprise to feel his jumper being lifted gently, his shirt untucked neatly. Warm, moist breath met the exposed sliver of skin, rippling under his clothes, all through Harry's body. The breath slithered upwards, followed by hands that crinkled the fabric, slipping under his collar and pulling his head back.

The feeling of a solid, heavy body descending onto him told Harry that he wasn't about to sit there waiting for stuff to happen, even if that was what was expected of him. He hoisted himself back onto the bed with some difficulty, rolling over to face... an unmistakably pleased expression on Severus' face. The temptation was irresistible. He tangled his fingers in the mass of buttons on the front of Severus' coat, unbuttoning them nimbly just as he levelled his face with Severus' for a deep, wanton kiss.

The last button was finally pried open, and Harry pushed at Severus's coat, letting it pool around the other's arms unconcernedly, kissing him more fiercely still. Barely a second had elapsed before Snape broke the kiss to rid himself of the coat simply, unpretentiously. He was torturingly slow in removing Harry's jumper, though. Finally, they

faced each other in their shirts. The two rows of buttons on Severus' shirt were disheartening to Harry, who knelt on the bed to kiss him again, his hands running over the barrage of buttons casually, snaking between their bodies to unfasten Severus' belt.

The very moment he touched the buckle, Severus tore his mouth away from Harry's and shoved him down with a disapproving look. Harry groaned inwardly, the linen under him much too cold after the bodily contact. A knee hovered just above his crotch to prevent him from sitting up again. Harry's hips jerked upwards of their own volition while he closed his eyes and attempted to control the anticipation.

When he stopped fidgeting, Severus' knee left its precarious position and he lay down beside Harry, leaning heavily on him, taking in his fiercely shut eyes, the fists closed on the rumpled linen, the thighs, acquiver with Harry's effort to keep his body still. He ran his fingertips through Harry's hairline, let them skim the contours of his face before gliding his hand across Harry's neck, sliding it down Harry's chest. When his hand grazed the waistband of Harry's trousers, he lowered his mouth to Harry's, silencing him with a kiss, knowing from the pressure of the parted lips that Harry's breath had caught. Still, his hand travelled downwards, tracing the fly of Harry's jeans, dipping deeper still to drag across the cleft concealed by the fabric. Harry's hips thrust up again, and Severus' hand immediately resumed its position on Harry's chest, undoing the top button of his shirt and hooking under the second.

The jerk that sent the button flying off the bed was so sudden that Harry broke the kiss to ascertain what had happened. A ticklish sensation made him look down at his chest, where he glimpsed Severus' hand, middle finger hooked under the next button but all others spreading, curling, brushing the exposed skin tantalisingly. The sensation was suddenly not ticklish at all. Severus tugged lightly on his hair to remind him there was still a kiss going on. *Pop.* Another button followed the first. *Pop.* Another. Severus' hand slid inside the shirt, probing and teasing, and Harry knew that an undignified sound had left his lips.

Again, he tried his chances with the belt, but his move stilled Severus entirely. He broke the kiss to shake his head almost imperceptibly at Harry. Against his will, Harry replaced his hands tensely on the bed. They were sweaty. But the hand under his shirt was just as cool and collected as its master.

Harry was momentarily reminded of Severus' words about not being a gentle lover. If he had told the truth, he was clearly controlling himself. Was he doing it for Harry's sake? Did that mean that he cared of that he didn't? He knew it was too late for such considerations, but had he really goaded Snape into doing something he didn't want to do?

That uncomfortable thought was Harry's last for the moment, for the last button had just reeled to the feet of the bed and there were fingertips creeping under the waistband of his trousers.

Severus' mouth dragged down his neck, the hand behind Harry's head sliding down his back and his side, and one of Severus' legs pressed itself between Harry's, and then fingers grazed the small of Harry's back in a way that nobody had ever done, *Harry* had never done it, and Harry found himself arching up against Severus' body-- whether to escape the tantalising touch or to seek a deeper one, he did not know. Severus raised his head from Harry's neck to observe the reactions his hands had provoked. He looked at Harry with an innocent expression that didn't match his actions at all and grazed the small of Harry's back in the same fashion as before, making him arch up with a hiss escaping his gritted teeth.

Swearing inwardly in frustration, Harry hooked his legs around the one between them, placed his hands on either side of Severus' face and pulled him in for a searing kiss, rolling them over to make sure that the man's hips were still while he wriggled out of his shirt. Then he grinned wickedly at the body spread out under him, wondering where to start. Severus stretched, crossing his arms loosely over his chest and looking defiantly at Harry.

Harry decided that a little teasing of his own was in order. He unbuckled his trousers, rose to his knees and slid them down his hips, leaning in to ghost his lips over Severus'. He pulled away to squirm out of the trousers just as Severus started to kiss him back. Severus glowered at him, to which Harry responded with a wink. He slid down from Severus' hips to straddle his knees and finally rid himself of the blasted belt. Having unbuckled it at last, Harry slid it slowly, so slowly, out of the trousers, making sure every movement could be felt through the fabric.

He smiled victoriously when they were finally unbuttoned, and his attention returned to Severus' shirt. He slid up again, carefully avoiding contact with the hips below his, and started unbuttoning it, button by painfully slow button, attaching his mouth to the nape of Severus' neck as soon as it became visible.

Severus uncrossed his arms and pressed them against the linen as Harry's lips brushed a soft downwards path. When they reached the waist, Severus went absolutely still as Harry, very, very lightly, replaced his lips with his teeth, grazing a short trail along the fabric, before raising his head with a final blow of moist air. Severus couldn't avoid the instant bucking of his hips. Harry looked up at him in mock interrogation. The gaze that met him was simply predatory. Severus tangled his fingers on Harry's hair, pulling him up. Just as Harry's lips brushed his, he grinned devilishly, whispering, '*Nox.*'

They were immediately engulfed by the thickest darkness. Harry found himself lying on his back, a strong pair of hands holding him firmly in place.

And then, lips. On his stomach. And his shoulders. And his wrists. Nibbling on his muscles, teasing the skin, moistening his underwear, closing upon it... Harry tried to move his arms, but the grip on them tightened. He tried to move his legs, but Severus lowered his whole weight on them. He tried to make a sound, but Severus' mouth was up there again, drawing the very breath out of Harry's lungs. For a moment, Harry had to let himself be kissed, touched, repositioned. Every time he twisted and squirmed, the pressure increased to the point, it seemed, that only his mouth was allowed to move. And even it was taken. His lips negotiated some room to manoeuvre that allowed him to play with Severus' mouth, pecking its corner, nibbling it playfully, capturing it wetly only to pull away before Severus could respond. It was exciting. It was fun.

Until Severus grew impatient and ground his hips against Harry's without warning. Just once. One... paralysing... time. Harry fell back onto the sheets with his lips parted in a gasp, and Severus plundered him with a bruising kiss.

But suddenly... nothingness. Severus pulled away without warning, and Harry blinked in the darkness. Silence and quietude. He sat up and looked warily around. The flimsiest clarity of the night outside filtered through the high window, but it was so faint in the December weather that it just reflected weakly on random glass objects. Harry blinked self-consciously in the dark, not quite willing to leave the bed and go looking for Severus. His legs felt a bit like jelly.

Then, all at once, the bed sagged behind him, warm skin pressed against him, and a long, moist kiss landed behind his ear. There were arms around Harry's waist. Harry bravely fought the urge to press backwards, for it seemed that words were also being spoken.

'Where were we before I had to tend to the logistical details?' Severus purred in his ear, tracing small patterns across Harry's stomach.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but nothing more than a hitched breath came out as Severus' hands traced a pattern slightly below his stomach. They peeked teasingly inside his underwear. They slid entirely inside it, their movements matching the playful nibbles on Harry's neck. Harry's hands grasped Severus' thighs, his hips dancing forwards, and Severus chose that moment to close his legs around Harry's and grind against him. Harry gripped him in a way that was surely painful. Fingers hooked under his underwear and pulled it down, careful to avoid all friction like that which Harry craved. When it reached his knees, Harry kicked it away and pressed back, drawing a very sharp breath from Severus, whose hands tightened around him again. Severus whispered, and a small flicker of light appeared on the wall opposite the bed, just enough for them to see each other's contours, shadows dancing on and around them.

Suddenly, though, something occurred to him. 'Wait! Stop...!'

The body against his froze, but the grip did not ease. If anything, it tightened. Harry, not quite ready to meet the cold gaze that surely awaited behind his back, racked his brains for a way of speaking his mind without embarrassing himself further. 'I--there's--hmm. In the other room. Erm...'

Severus didn't budge. Harry took a deep breath, gathered his wits and craned his neck to whisper in Severus' ear. Severus frowned at him, blinked, and Harry turned away again with his cheeks burning. A second after that, the body behind his trembled convulsively, and Harry noted with amazement that Severus was smothering sniggers on his shoulder.

'So that's the reason for that absurd tray. There are more practical ways, you know?' Severus snorted.

'No,' Harry scowled, 'I don't. Remember?'

'Oh, dear,' Severus pressed Harry tightly against him, still fighting his own mirth. His hands slid down Harry's lower back and slipped around the sides abruptly. 'We can't waste all that effort. But later. I have other plans for you now.'

He flicked Harry's wand dismissively towards the door, which unbolted to let in the tray. Once it had landed with a small thud, the door bolted itself again, but Harry no longer recognised the sounds, for Severus' mouth, and his hands, had resumed their journey. It had never occurred to Harry that December was such a hot month. The mere touch of Severus' fingertips, tracing his body negligently, seemed to scorch him. He was melting. He had to be melting...

Severus' mouth pressed feverishly against his again, his arms hooked firmly under Harry's shoulders, and Harry instinctively tried to roll over, but Severus didn't let him, his legs prying Harry's apart, his breath in Harry's ear, 'Look at me.'

But Harry couldn't quite open his eyes, for Severus' hands had descended to his hips again, and Severus' lips were smashing his, and once the hands were back on this shoulders, Harry could hardly breathe because it burned... it *burned*. Something would surely break inside of him if he moved, so Harry lay very still, his hands gripping Severus' back tightly.

'It'll help if you breathe,' Severus instructed, quite breathless himself. Harry took a tentative breath, and yes, it helped, but then the world blacked out of his mind because Severus had moved. And he was kissing him. Under his tense hands, he could feel the muscles of Severus' thin back dancing beneath the skin in synch with their movements. Another second and Harry's hands dropped onto the bed, taut to the fingertips. Severus' hands travelled down his arms, holding his wrists, closing painfully upon them--they would be sore in the morning. Harry didn't mind. He was glad that something was holding him steady.

They held each other in that trembling, bruising embrace for a long time, oblivious to the castle that slept around them, shutting everything out of their secret, rocking each other passionately, tenderly, briskly, the headboard creaking beside them, pounding the wall on occasion. Protected by the dark, Snape could smile into his kiss, and Harry could pour into his the words that he daren't say aloud.

Propped up on his elbow, Harry surveyed Severus' thin body, half hidden by the sheet. Angular, bony and unnaturally pale. Nobody had ever looked better in Harry's eyes. He sighed contentedly, pulling softly at the sheet and watching, mesmerised, as the hipbone emerged.

'You're not about to sleep, are you?'

Severus quirked an eyebrow at him. 'Yes, I am. And so are you. Lie down.'

He pulled at Harry's arm and Harry dropped onto him, pouting hugely.

'I'm not sleepy...!'

'And I'm not sixteen. Be quiet,' Severus grumbled, his voice muffled by the arm across his face.

Harry looked him up and down thoughtfully, and then he grinned, reaching enthusiastically for the bowl of cream on the tray.

Severus opened his eyes to look at Harry, who now sat on his knees beside him.

'What are you doing?'

'Entertaining myself.' Harry smiled sweetly.

'That's cold.'

'Not for long,' Harry promised. 'I'm curious.'

'About what?' Severus grumbled, glaring down at the mess Harry was making.

'The elves made this specially for me. And I haven't tasted it yet.'

'Potter, I'm tired. And you shou--oh. Oh. Don't do that.'

'What, this?'

'Yes!' Severus hissed. 'Are you trying to kill me?'

Harry paid him no attention whatsoever.

'You insufferable whelp.'

Harry licked his lips and looked at him. 'Yes?'

'Entertain yourself in a way that doesn't require my active participation.'

'All right,' Harry obeyed, stretching to place the bowl back on the tray.

A moment later, Severus cleared his throat. 'That requires my participation.'

'Not necessarily,' Harry whispered from under the sheet.

'Whelp,' Severus murmured.

At the early hours of the morning, the few ghosts venturing down to the deeper parts of the castle remarked that the dungeons had undergone a peculiarly agitated night.

Paris, 1900

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry woke up alone, sprawled under the sheet that covered him up to his hair. He didn't even need to extend his arm to know it, but he did it anyway, curling around himself, craving the warmth of the night for just another moment.

Yet his overactive mind refused to delay dawn, so he cracked his eyes open with a sigh at the emptiness beside him. Stretching, he pushed the bedclothes down to his knees, taking a deep breath before sitting up.

There he was, looking at Harry from the foot of the bed, his arms drawn up to his chest. He was in full teaching attire. He looked more forbidding, and forbidden, than ever. Harry mechanically reached for the linen, which he pulled up to his waist, suddenly very aware of his own nudity. Severus' expression didn't change. Was he still 'Severus' this morning? A drawn out silence followed.

'Good morning,' Harry eventually tried.

'Good morning,' Severus deadpanned after a moment.

'Is this the moment you tell me that it all meant nothing?' Harry asked, his voice bravely even. 'And that I must forget it happened?'

'Would you?'

'No,' Harry said honestly.

Severus nodded, unsurprised. There was a rather uncomfortable silence, which he broke with, 'I hurt you.'

Harry followed his gaze to his own wrists, red marks standing out proudly against his pale skin. 'Oh, huh... It doesn't hurt,' he said lamely.

'Hmm.'

'What time is it?'

'Very early. If you go now, you'll be in your bed before your friends wake up.'

Oh, he was being thrown out. Harry's grip on the sheets tightened as he otherwise ignored the words.

'So, er, why are you up so early? Am I such bad sleeping company that you'd rather brave the weather?'

He had meant to say it as a joke, but his mood didn't quite allow it to come out as such. Harry mentally cursed himself. 'Sorry. I mean... are you usually up so early?'

Severus shook his head negatively.

'Oh. Huh...'

'I went to see Professor Dumbledore.'

'Oh.'

'I couldn't keep this from him.'

'Of course.' Harry gulped. 'And he...?'

'He's very disappointed.'

'Oh.'

'With me.'

'Oh?'

'He seems to think I should have prevented this, knowing beforehand about your... feelings. He feels that I took advantage of the situation.'

'He doesn't think...?'

'... that I forced you? No. I used rather broad strokes, but I didn't lie. Yet, he thinks that I could have stopped you, and because I didn't... I believe the words were "unashamedly took advantage of the boy's vulnerability." Can't blame him.'

'I can talk to him. I can explain that... I'm not vulnerable, I... I can tell him how it happened!'

Severus cut him off with a gesture. 'He knows how it happened, possibly better than you. Your behaviour was expected. Mine wasn't. He expected better from me, is all.'

'Oh,' Harry uttered, only just becoming aware of the chilling air biting at his skin.

'You should get dressed before you fall ill,' Severus pointed out. Harry ignored him.

'Do you regret it?' he enquired, determined not to make a scene, yet unable to stop the question from surfacing.

'I regretted it long before it happened.'

A dull, grinding ache crept inside of Harry. 'Why did you do it, then? *Pity?*' he added silently.

Severus actually looked embarrassed. 'I... truly... couldn't stop myself.'

'I see,' Harry mouthed, unable to drag his voice out of his heavy chest. Severus' supremely uncomfortable stance was almost as painful as his words.

'I think you should go back to your dormitory. People will wonder where you are.'

'May I stay?' Harry muttered, cutting Severus off before he could say anything. 'I'm not going to make a scene. I'd just like to stay a moment longer.'

'Food will be sent up if you tap your wand on the bedside table,' Severus relented, casting him a weary glance.

'Thanks,' Harry said in a low voice, not hungry in the least, watching as though hypnotised as Severus reached for the doorknob, opened the door and prepared to leave. 'Will I see you today? In Occlumency, or something?'

'The headmaster suspended your Occlumency lessons half an hour ago.'

'Of course.' Harry pursed his lips. 'At lunch, then?'

'In fact, lunch and dinner will be served in your respective common rooms today. The Great Hall is being prepared for tonight's performance.'

'Oh...'

'I might see you in the audience, though.'

Harry's face lit up.

'But I doubt that we'll have a chance to talk.'

Harry's face fell. He suppressed a gulp and looked up. 'Will I see you in class tomorrow, then... Before you leave?'

Severus blinked slowly. 'There will be no classes this week. You have the same privilege the other houses were granted.'

'The privilege, of course...' Harry echoed.

'The prefects should be announcing it during breakfast.'

'Hmm,' Harry hummed absently. 'So this is goodbye.'

Severus nodded. Harry tugged at the half-untucked sheet, wrapped it around himself and slid off the bed, wincing when his feet touched the cold floor.

'Kiss me goodbye,' he said as firmly as possible through quivering lips, his shoulders hunched to bring some warmth to his neck.

Severus, whose back was already turned to him, replied wearily, 'I really don't think I should.'

'I didn't kiss you good night. And you weren't here to kiss me good morning.' Harry's last shreds of dignity crumbled around him as he heard himself say, 'But I think I deserve a parting kiss. Am I not worth even that?'

Severus closed the door, turning to face Harry with an unreadable expression. Harry took a step forward, and another, coaching Severus' back against the wall, feeling the faintest glimmer of hope as Severus' legs parted, albeit reluctantly, to give room to Harry's body.

The sheet slipped off of Harry's shoulders and pooled around his waist where their hips met. He honestly hadn't planned this, and he was about to say as much when Severus' fingers reached for the hem of the sheet, twirling it absently.

Harry heart sank as Severus repositioned the sheet around Harry's shoulders, tucking it around his neck and holding it securely in his grasp. He sighed quietly, his eyes set on the hands that rested on his chest. So absorbed was he in his humiliation that he didn't notice that the hands were tugging gently at the sheet, pulling it, and him, against Severus. Only when they touched did he realise that the grasp had tightened to the point where Severus' knuckles were white and that Severus was leaning in to brush his neck, his cheek, his mouth in the lightest, most fugitive of kisses. Harry looked up at him, and Severus hesitated, inspecting his wide, hollowed eyes.

'A dementor's kiss might actually leave more of your soul behind.'

A sad, guilty smile spread on Harry's lips. He leaned in to silence Severus with a kiss of his own and grant them another moment, just another one, before they stepped into the harsh reality outside.

Harry was dragging himself distractedly up to the common room when a bushy head clambered around the corner in his direction.

'I really can't handle a lecture right now, Hermione,' Harry said quietly, yet firmly.

'Did anything happen? Did anything go wrong?' she asked worriedly.

'Saying goodbye was a bit harder than I'd thought.'

She looked at him doubtfully for a second, and then she nearly smothered him in an overtight hug. 'Oh, I was so worried. You might have been caught, something might--'

'I wasn't caught. Nothing happened. Don't worry,' Harry said absently.

'I... I told Ron that you were checking the Quidditch pitch's conditions for tomorrow's match. Just in case he asks about it.'

'Thanks. Is he up?'

Hermione responded via a nod and a gigantic yawn. 'I've been sitting in the common room since four in the morning,' she clarified.

Harry stared at her. 'Because of me, mum?'

She yawned again. 'Someone had to have a ready excuse for when Ron woke up. I didn't think you'd take so long.'

Harry cringed. 'Sorry.'

'It's all right. I busied myself. I had to post an announcement on the message board, and I finished my part on a gr--we won't be having any classes this week, by the way.'

'Yeah, Se--he told me.'

'Don't let that name slip around the others. They're all up already.'

'How'd you get out of there?'

Hermione smirked. 'I told them I was coming downstairs to see Draco. Ron went cross-eyed with the glare he shot me, but that was the only way I could be sure nobody would want to come with me. And I had to talk to you before they saw you.'

'Thanks...' Harry repeated. 'I can't tell Ron. Not yet, at least. He'd--anyway. I should go have a look at the pitch, then, shouldn't I? They'll bombard me with questions when I come back, and I don't even know what the weather's like. Does milady need an escort?'

He offered his arm flamboyantly. She accepted it with a smile, and they made their way down quietly.

'It's sunny, by the way,' Hermione let him know halfway down the stairs.

It was seven-thirty in the evening, and the Gryffindor common room buzzed with activity. The younger years had exceptionally been allowed to stay up after curfew for the performance, and they were understandably the most excited of the chattering groups that crowded the place.

Harry, who had sleep-walked through the day, sat by the window with Ron, waiting for Hermione. It was amazing to him that nobody had guessed what he had done the previous night just by looking at him.

She arrived at last, looking very prim in a long, grey skirt and a black jumper, her school cloak folded on her arm. She had wrestled her hair into a bun with a few loose strands framing her face. She really looked quite pretty.

Ron, who was casually dressed, as usual, stared at her. Harry shrugged. He hadn't even changed out of the high collared jumper and trousers that he had worn to the dungeons.

'I just thought that I could dress up a bit--we never really get a chance to--'

'Gift from the boyfriend?' Ron grumbled, tilting his chin towards the mother-of-pearl necklace that glistened on her neck.

'I wouldn't take jewels from him,' she said dignifiedly. 'My parents gave me this for my birthday.' Ron sneered doubtfully.

'You look very nice,' Harry commented pointedly before they started squabbling again.

She smiled at him, unfolding the school cloak and settling it neatly on her shoulders before suggesting that they went downstairs.

'It only starts at eight...'

'But they specifically told us that they were opening the doors at a quarter to eight.' Hermione scowled. 'Weren't you wearing that yesterday, Harry? Couldn't you have changed?'

'I changed my shirt!' he said brightly, tugging at the jumper's collar and neglecting to inform her that the shirt she had fitted for him was irreparably damaged. 'Why, do I look bad?'

'You might smell a bit,' she commented offhandedly. 'But you look quite fetching.'

'You should think so--you picked it...'

'Oh, so *that's* it...' She slapped her forehead playfully.

'Is there anything I should know about, children?' Ron intervened, looking from one to the other.

'No!' they said in unison, poking his stomach mockingly to lighten the tone.

'Wait!' Ginny ran to them, grasping Harry's arm. 'Are you going in with someone?'

'I am now, apparently,' he retorted, staring at her. 'What happened?'

Ginny rolled her eyes. 'Dean won't leave me alone. *Now* he wants to make up! I need a break from him. Help me...!'

'Want me to have a talk with him?' Ron offered.

Ginny smiled. 'No, thanks. He'll eventually have to understand that it should be enough that I talked to him.'

'Well, then, if that's it...' Harry and Ginny led the way out of the common room.

Half the school already crowded by the doors to the Entrance Hall, where the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady stood side by side, talking to the students while they waited.

'There he is...' Hermione announced, spotting Malfoy.

'Good evening,' he greeted politely, placing an arm around Hermione's shoulders with an expression that Harry had never seen him wearing. 'Will anybody bother to look at the stage?'

'Pathetic,' Ron muttered under his breath, excusing himself. 'I want to wish Luna good luck.'

'She's in it?' Ginny asked.

'Yeah, playing a fairy of sorts, I think,' he said over his shoulder, disappearing beyond the oak doors as a few second years shouted, 'Not fair!'

The four of them faced each other uncomfortably.

'So, Draco, are you curious?' Ginny asked, trying to ease the tension.

'I can't wait,' he deadpanned.

Hermione crossed her arms and tapped her foot, pouting at him.

'But Hermione says it's good, and she's got great taste, so we'll see.' He hugged her from behind. 'Muggles do occasionally get it right.'

Ginny made a gagging sound to indicate that he should end the display. Harry, who was paying them no attention whatsoever, was snapped out of his inner world by Malfoy.

'By the way, Potter, we need extra practice this week, remember?'

'Yeah... We've got a match tomorrow, and another right after the holidays--'

'--and we've got one on the eve of Phantom,' Malfoy added pointedly.

'Boys,' Hermione piped in warningly, 'not during our last week of rehearsals.'

'Hermione!'

'We've been good, Professor,' Malfoy pointed out, punctuating his argument with a kiss on her neck. 'We know our lines, our blockings, we've worked hard, and I'll go mad if I'm not allowed to see the sky just once the whole week.' He finished with another peck.

'That's blackmail...!' She virtually melted.

'Is it working?' He nuzzled her neck. How far he had come from the boy who just wouldn't commit.

Harry and Ginny smirked at each other in mock disgust. 'Maybe we should just go and leave them to it,' Harry jokingly suggested.

'Good evening,' rumbled a cold voice that made him freeze mid-chuckle and pale considerably. 'I don't have to remind you that in spite of the... irregular conditions, this is still a school assignment for your colleagues and, as representatives of your houses, you are expected to behave accordingly,' their Potions master informed them sullenly.

Malfoy and Hermione broke apart, holding each other's hand discreetly. Their teacher raised an eyebrow towards Harry and Ginny, who disentangled their arms awkwardly, and he swept past them brusquely, nearly bumping into Ron.

He walked in their direction, glowering over his shoulder. 'That one's in a bad mood...'

'How does it look--inside?' Hermione enquired.

'Great!' Ron said cheerily. Malfoy snorted doubtfully. Ron sneered upon seeing his hand holding Hermione's. 'As I was saying, it looks great. Dad'd love it. I don't even know what half of that stuff is.' He grinned at Harry and Ginny. Malfoy gulped down another snort and Hermione elbowed him.

'Anyway, the doors are opening, and we should get going.'

Just as Ron said the last word, the oak doors creaked open, and the crowd poured in, the Friar and the Lady leading the way. Malfoy and Hermione moved along, Malfoy looking contemptuously at Harry and Ron as he muttered something along the lines of, 'I hope they don't breed.'

Ginny let out a low whistle when they entered. They were facing an enormous audience, rows and rows of empty seats that gradually ascended, flights of stairs on either side of them. The staff was led to a square of golden seats in the middle of the block. The first and second rows were reserved for a few Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws from different years who had been asked for cooperation. The section above the staff's was reserved for the Classics, and the remaining seats were unclaimed.

'We won't be able to see properly,' Seamus commented.

'Actually,' Ron grinned, 'they gave us the best seats. Most of the action takes place on a mezzanine, so we'll actually be at eye level with the actors. They say it was a nicety for their fellow thespians.'

'That was nice,' Harry commented, paying close attention to the staff's seats.

'And there's more to those seats than it seems,' Ron went on. 'They--'

'Will we have this sort of flourish too, or are they going to beat us just with their seats?' Malfoy complained to Hermione.

'This isn't a competition, Draco!' she retorted, taking him to the row directly behind Harry's. Harry sat with Ginny, and Ron sat beside them with Seamus. When the room appeared to be full, there was the clearing of a throat, and Lisa Turpin's magnified voice greeted them.

'Good evening,' she giggled, 'and welcome. We must request that you mind your seating arrangements. The audience is comprised of two blocks that have been momentarily brought together. There is a small gap between the middle seats of every row that should be kept empty.'

People looked around themselves. Harry noted that there was indeed more room between his seat and the one to his right than between him and Ginny. The wooden pattern of the floor too, was different there.

'I repeat, please mind that small gap, don't sit there, and don't place any personal belongings on it. It will play a part tonight. That said, we hope you enjoy our show, and welcome to the Moulin Rouge!'

'I think my skin just crawled,' Malfoy said matter-of-factly.

'I didn't know you liked the sensitive type, Hermione.' Ron snorted. 'You could have tricked us with Krum.'

Hermione glared daggers in his direction. Malfoy furrowed his brow. 'Krum? Viktor Krum?'

'Will you behave?!' Ginny snapped. Harry was focused on a certain someone sitting beside Dumbledore.

Proving Lisa right, as soon as everybody had quieted down, the gap creaked and rose, breaking the rows in two halves with a divide that went up to Harry's elbow. He exchanged an amused glance with Neville, who sat to his right.

'I suppose this is where we go our separate ways.' Neville shrugged nonchalantly.

'Oh, but won't you fight for me?' Harry sighed dramatically.

'Shh!'

The candles above them were dimming. A few giggles and whispers later, the audience was finally quiet and wrapped in darkness. A few irregular knocks on wood signalled the beginning (this was explained by Hermione in a nearly inaudible murmur) and another voice, a male one, spoke up, '*This story is about a love. The woman I loved... is...*' There was a deep breath. '*... dead.*'

'This was a comedy, they'd said?' Malfoy whispered.

A few scattered spots of light glimmered faintly in the dark, and a stronger voice took over. *There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy..!*

The glimmering lights were brighter. They were candles, emerging around them.

'...a little shy, and sad of eye..!'

Ginny grinned at Harry. 'Did the Muggles write a musical about you?'

'But very wise was he...'

Ginny smirked. 'Forget what I said.'

'And then one day, one magic day he passed my way...'

The candles descended to the floor and circled them. The audience seats moved, so that rather than face the doors to the Entrance Hall, they now faced the stage, hidden from their sight by an auburn curtain where the staff table used to be. The seats approached it, and as they did, Harry saw that the walls, too, were covered in curtains, giving off the illusion that the Great Hall was much smaller than its actual size.

'This he said to me...'

The candles glided slowly to the front of the audience, some of them sliding by Harry's elbow, which rested on the wooden divide, and adjourned on the edge of the stage.

'The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved, the voice rose to a bellow, In return!' A musical crescendo accompanied these words, and flames rose up from a few candles, twirling against the red background to form the words,

'Paris

1900'

The candles dimmed again until only these two words burned midair, and then even they vanished as the curtain rose and the first act began.

For an hour or so, they were treated to what was surely the most colourful experience of their lives. The Bohemians seemed to have exhausted the twins' stock of fireworks. Harry missed most of it, melancholy as he was, but some of the effects were so nicely done that even he paid attention once in a while.

Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst had been cast as Christian and Satine, the romantic leads. Terry, who, according to Hermione, would look handsome in a bin liner, looked incredibly fetching no matter the costume. Mandy was clearly having a ball with her sumptuous wardrobe, oblivious to the contempt some elderly members of the staff felt for the sparse fabric in it. Jaws went slack when she made her entrance swinging above them in a sequined top and the shortest skirt Harry had ever seen. Parvati informed them that the skirt had been a last minute addition demanded by the staff. Either way, it was a joy to behold the pair.

There were swoons from all corners when Terry sang *Your Song*, along with coos and whistles from the boys at the sight of Mandy's see-through nightgown. Hermione, who knew almost every song by heart, sang along with Christian. Beside her, Malfoy huffed.

Surprisingly, the biggest ovation so far went to Professor Flitwick, who barged in irreducibly with curly black hair and the oddest wardrobe, introducing himself as *Henri Marie Raymond Toulouse-Lautrec-Mooooontfa*.'

Harry was incredibly bored during the *Spectacular, Spectacular* sequence.

'You're just too impatient tonight, Harry,' Hermione reproached him.

'Hermione, this number is just too long.'

'Well, it didn't focus on the scantily clad Mandy, so I can see why you don't like it.' Ginny grinned.

Draco pulled Hermione back onto her seat with a scowl. 'Will the lot of you shut up? They're going at it again,' he snapped. Onstage, the *Elephant Love Medley* started.

'It's a musical, Malfoy. It's meant to have lots of songs,' Ron snarked.

'Good grief, is that an elephant?'

'Shush!' Ginny glared at them.

'... you're going to be bad for business. I can tell, Satine predicted before kissing Christian. The curtain fell, and Lisa spoke up again.

'There will be a short intermission now. If you leave the room, please be back within six minutes.'

Most people chose to stay and comment on the first part. A scattered few walked around to talk with their mates, and just a few left the Hall. Among them was Harry.

'Don't be long, Harry. It's a *short* intermission,' Hermione reminded him.

'Yeah, if... I'm a little late, don't worry. I need to stretch my legs.'

'Harry...' she whispered warningly.

'I'm not really in the mood for this, Hermione. Don't worry about me. I'll be right back.'

Malfoy put an arm on Hermione's shoulder and tapped his foot impatiently, glaring at her.

Harry squeezed himself along the row with Ron, who wanted to go backstage again.

'Won't that bother them?' Hermione shouted after them.

'They're just resting for a moment,' he told her, apparently very well informed about the Bohemians' activities.

'Tell Luna she was great!' Ginny requested. 'Is the Green Fairy showing up again?'

'Don't think so.' Ron climbed down the stairs as Harry slipped out of the Hall.

Hermione eyed him warily. Malfoy tapped her cheek with his index finger. 'You must be Miss Granger. Nice to meet you. I'm The Neglected Boyfriend.'

Just outside the Entrance Hall, Harry met with two Quidditch players, with whom he chatted for a bit. Eventually, the corridor emptied, and Harry paced about, pensive and alone, recognising the last bars of *Like a Virgin* blaring beyond the wall. Aunt Petunia listened to that song quite a lot when Uncle Vernon was out of earshot.

He sighed, crestfallen, wondering if he could just skip the second half without being noticed, when someone else came out of the Entrance Hall and walked up to him. It was he. Harry gazed at him, not quite knowing what to say. Severus' gaze was so stern that Harry had the instant urge to defend himself even before an accusation was made.

'Never knew I could feel like this...' Terry was singing.

'You shouldn't be wandering alone at this time of the night,' Severus said bluntly.

'What do you care either way?' Harry mumbled. He regretted his words instantly.

'I need a word with you,' Severus went on, unfazed.

'About what?'

'Your godfather.'

Sweet *Merlin*, not again. 'Leave me alone. I left you. I kept my word,' Harry mumbled thickly.

'I didn't.'

Harry blinked. 'You didn't what?'

'... enjoy what happened to your godfather.'

'Every day I'm loving you more and more.'

Intermission

Chapter 23 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

Harry thought he might lose his balance. 'Are you trying to drive me mad?'

Severus shook his head negatively.

'Then why...?'

'I wished him dead more than once. I fantasised about it almost my whole life,' Severus deadpanned absolutely indifferently. 'But not when it happened.'

'Why not?' Harry murmured.

Severus had apparently thought that his previous answer would be enough for Harry, for he seemed to be searching for the right words.

'You were so thoroughly destroyed by what happened that I can only think of one person who might have taken any joy from it. I am not that person.'

'Suddenly my life doesn't seem such a waste...'

Harry actually felt faint, and there were no dementors around to serve as an excuse. He walked up to the wall and sat on the floor looking up. The stone against his back vibrated with the music that blared beyond it.

'It all revolves around you.'

'Why are you telling me this now?'

'As I recall, you were very upset when we last talked about it, and I might not have a chance to clarify this later.'

'Thanks.'

'Perhaps now our conversation won't be such a painful memory to you.'

'It was a memory. Better than nothing,' Harry said halfheartedly. 'Are you leaving? Now?'

Severus nodded.

Harry gulped. 'Weren't you leaving tomorrow?'

'There's been a slight change of plans.'

'Will you be back soon?'

'Probably,' Severus countered dismissively. 'Why aren't you inside?'

'I'm not really in the mood for romance,' Harry confessed. A heavy silence followed.

'... I'll love you until the end of time.'

'I have to go,' Severus eventually pointed out.

'I know.'

'Go back inside.'

'I will.'

'I don't like this ending.' Justin wheezed.

Severus glanced warily at him and turned to leave. Harry itched to jump up and stop him; he had to say something to make him want to stay, but nothing came to mind. The one word that could sum up how he felt slipped out of his lips before he knew they had formed it.

'Wait...'

In the Great Hall, although the audience loathed Justin Finch-Fletchley's Duke, it loved his turn in *Like a Virgin*, a duet with Ernie McMillan's Harry Zidler. There was instant applause when the curtain fell on them and another rose from the sidewall to show the romantic leads composing their love song, *Come What May*.

Malfoy furrowed his brow at them. 'This one might actually be sappier than ours.'

'I like this number already.' Ron grinned at Malfoy's pained expression.

'Seasons may change, winter to spring, but I'll love you until the end of time.'

Malfoy actually cringed. Hermione smiled at him.

'Aww, poor him...' Ginny cooed at Terry.

'Professor Dumbledore says Mr Luhrman really wants to make a film out of this script. I hope he casts Ewan McGregor as Christian,' Hermione mused.

'Who's that?' Malfoy snapped.

'Oh.' Hermione started, looking right ahead. 'No-one.'

'And there's no mountain too high, no river too wide...' The audience glided towards the main stage again as more actors entered the scene and the couple, disappearing briefly, popped up in their midst already in different costumes.

'Sing out this song and I'll be there by your side...'

'No, Dean, I won't,' Ginny said plainly as Dean looked wistfully at her.

'But I'll love you until the end of time...'

'Wait...' Harry cursed himself instantly for letting his voice falter. It was just one word... Others would have to follow.

Severus stopped in his tracks, but he didn't turn.

'Can't... can't you stay just another minute?'

'I don't have much time.'

'People will notice if you leave before the performance is over.'

'I hardly think I'll be missed.'

'I'll miss you,' Harry blurted out without thinking.

'You promised me you wouldn't be jealous...' Mandy whispered to a brokenhearted Christian.

Severus turned to face him. Harry braced himself on his knees.

'Love'll drive you mad!'

'I can't stay.'

'I know.'

'You don't care if it's wrong or if it's right!'

'Don't do that.'

Harry took a deep breath and sat up. Severus resumed his walk down the corridor.

'It's more than I can stand!' Terry bellowed inside.

'Please, stay.'

'Why does my heart cry?'

Severus raised his eyes to the ceiling and back to Harry. 'It should never have come to this.'

'Feelings I can't fight!'

Harry gulped and said nothing.

'I shouldn't have come to you.'

'I'm happy you did,' Harry said quietly.

'...believe me when I say I love you!'

'You're not happy at all.'

'It gave me another minute with you.'

Severus stared at him. 'I should never have touched you.'

'But you did, and I liked it.'

'I really must go.'

'I'll wait for you.'

'But just don't deceive me...'

'You gave me your word.'

'I might have to break it,' Harry said boldly.

'I don't want to have to see you when I'm back,' Severus snapped.

Harry stood frozen, eyes set on the billowing robes that trailed away from him, out of his life.

'Wait,' he murmured as an afterthought, but Severus didn't stop walking. 'Be careful.'

'Believe me when I say I love you!'

It was useless to prolong the torment. He might actually lose his voice with the effort to keep it under control. Harry took a few, slow steps up the corridor. He really didn't want to go back inside.

The hand that brushed the back of his neck stopped him in his tracks even before it pressed on his shoulder. The body behind his made him spin on his heels even before he knew it was there. Another hand hovered just under his ear, as though in doubt about whether to touch him or not.

Harry took the initiative in its stead. He grabbed the front of Severus' robes so forcefully that he was actually thrown backwards, slamming them both against the wall. He hardly felt it scraping against his aching back. He was being kissed. Or rather, crushed, smashed, smothered in an embrace that barely left him room to breathe.

A loud meowl broke them apart. Mrs Norris sat on the steps to the Entrance Hall, watching them intently.

'It'll call Filch,' Harry heard himself say as though from a distance, but he didn't try to slip out of the embrace. Neither did Severus.

'It never tells on the teachers,' Severus informed him, casting the poor cat a venomous glance. Yet he didn't resume the kiss. He appeared to have realised what they were doing. A ridiculously insane idea flitted into Harry's mind.

'Don't go,' he whispered against Severus' lips. He was pushed further against the wall in response. Everybody but them was in the Great Hall. Even the ghosts... Would he dare?

He found that he would when Mrs Norris meowled again, reminding him of how preciously fleeting that moment was. Severus's hold was already beginning to slacken. Harry gripped him as fiercely as he could.

'Lead the way,' he requested, he *ordered*, in a tone that he had never used before. Severus gazed at him quizzically, but that was apparently all the invitation he needed, for he swiftly pushed Harry through a small door at the end of the corridor. Harry vaguely recognised the room as the one he had been sent to when he was chosen as Hogwarts' champion. Judging from the sheer amount of clothing neatly stacked everywhere, it had been turned into a dressing room for the Bohemians. The Great Hall was just beyond the wall...

'Tonight is the night when dreaming ends...' Mandy sobbed onstage.

Harry took a deep breath and pulled Severus into a searing, bruising kiss. Their last. He all but tried to pour his soul, his mind, into his mouth--he wished he could mingle them with Severus' somehow.

'Another hero, another mindless crime...'

Harry tugged at Severus' coat, untucking his shirt, making his cloak billow around them. Severus' fingertips brushed the corners of Harry's mouth, pressed them, were moistened by Harry's tongue, their lips no longer enough to sate the need that had erupted.

'On and on, does anybody know what we are living for...'

Belts were unfastened, trousers carelessly unbuttoned, fabric tugged and stretched just a bit, just enough for their skin to meet, just enough for the heat of both bodies to travel across that sliver.

'Another heartache, another failed romance...'

Harry tangled his fingers in Severus' hair, pulling it, grazing his throat with his teeth. He drew in a sharp breath upon finding himself spun to face the wall. The move was so brusque that he slammed against the stone, and this time it didn't hurt more solely because he had been through worse in Quidditch. He braced his head on his arms and waited in the fleeting, darkened silence that followed. His only connection with the world was the feeling of Severus' fingers digging into his hips.

'... does anybody know what we are living for...'

The seats moved so that they were almost level with the floor, and the divide creaked and squirmed, breaking them into two large groups. Ginny, who had been spoofing the songs with Neville, had to let go of his hand abruptly. She lost her balance and nearly toppled over. Malfoy stretched forward to grab the hood of her cloak, pulling her back into her place. She thanked him quietly and returned her attention to the stage.

'The show must go on...'

Hermione crossed her arms and scowled at Malfoy. He held her gaze.

'You might as well have fallen onto her lap.'

'Oh, jealous...!' He grinned, sliding an arm around her waist to tickle her sides.

'Stop...!'

'Yes.' Ron sighed. 'Please.'

'The show must go on...'

Malfoy leaned in to kiss her, but he reeled back into his place when the seats spun slowly, a long corridor forming between them, from the stage to the doors.

'Outside the dawn is breaking on the stage...'

'... that holds our final destiny!'

The keening sound that was wrenched from Harry's throat, echoing his vulnerability to the very edges of the room, was so helpless that Severus actually eased his hold on him. But Harry reached behind himself to pull him closer, gripping him as tightly as he could. No words were needed.

'The show must go on...'

Severus' hand reaching around his neck, his head dropping back against Severus' shoulder, lips whispering something nonsensical against his ear to help him calm down, his own hands grasping at the fabric of Severus' robes...

'The show must go on...'

Heavy breathing, gasps that couldn't be repressed escaping their mouths, hands sliding under clothing, running roughly across moist skin, muscles tightening, quivering...

'Inside my heart is breaking...'

Dragging his teeth along Severus' neck, mouthing, 'I love you,' against his skin, because even if he wasn't allowed to voice them, he didn't want the words to go unsaid...

'My make-up may be flaking...'

Laying guilty, feverish kisses on his skin, breathing out his thoughts against his mouth... 'I love you,' even if he couldn't hear it...

'But my smile still stays on...'

Lips closing eagerly against lips, hemlines chafing against tense skin, bodies pressing together, closing out the chilling air of the empty room, Severus cradling Harry's head to his neck to shield it from further harm...

'The show must go on...'

Letting out a drawn out wail promptly smothered by a mouth as eager as his, pouring an assortment of undignified sounds into each others' mouths...

'I'll top the bill. I'll earn the kill...'

Feeling Severus' head droop against the nape of his neck as they slid down the wall, catching their breath, unwilling to let go...

'I have to find the will to carry on...'

Disentangling themselves from one another silently, eyes downcast, lips pursed...

'With the show...'

Locking eyes just once more before opening the door and stepping back into the corridor, leaving a stack of Ravenclaw uniforms in serious need of ironing as sole trace of their presence...

'...with the show!'

Sitting stubbornly on the floor and watching him leave.

Mandy walked tearfully along the corridor towards the doors, which opened smoothly for her.

'...with the show!'

The doors slammed shut behind her, echoing ominously for a moment and reopening to let her in, walking to the curtain on her left, which rose to reveal Terry staring thoughtfully out a window.

Justin wasn't even onstage, and still he was booed as Satine clumsily tried to convince Christian that she no longer cared for him.

'Poor Christian...' Lavender muttered.

Draco rolled his eyes. 'What a pair of bleeding idiots!'

'You're very uppity, for someone who goes down a *catacombalone* to play the hero.' Parvati glared at him.

'The truth is that I am the Hindu courtesan... and I choose the Maharajah, Satine said firmly, taking her leave with a stunned Christian gaping at her back.

Harry scanned the seats for his mates' location and climbed discreetly up the stairs, sitting beside Ginny just as the seats glided to the side to show them an anguished Christian being comforted by his friends.

'Harry!' Hermione exclaimed.

'Not now.'

'I was just going to say that you just lost--'

'I know what I lost,' he said somberly. She gazed at him full of concern.

He couldn't bring himself to focus on the plot. Satine pushed her lover away and made up with him in a way that was just too offensively easy, and Harry couldn't be bothered to care for them. He had almost dozed off when Mandy stepped onstage in a lovely white dress that drew whistles from the boldest members of the audience.

He liked the final chorus with the leads and the bohemians, but he hated the death scene. Death tearing people apart had never been a remotely comfortable issue for him. Malfoy too disliked the scene, albeit for a different reason.

The curtain had fallen between them and the play-within-a-play, and the stage had drawn so close to the audience that the curtain flew over them, revealing the cast 'backstage'. Terry held Mandy's lifeless body to his chest, drawing out a hysterical cry that seemed to have been ripped from his deepest confines, and Malfoy actually laughed. Hermione elbowed him with a ferocious glare. He smothered his laughter behind his hand, apologising at last when his speech returned. And then he snorted.

'Draco!'

'But he cries in a funny way! It's not my fault!'

'What a charmer, Hermione,' Ron tossed over his shoulder.

Harry fidgeted and sighed, trying to will the curtains shut again. An eternity had elapsed when the play, a story about people, but above all, a story about love, a love that would live forever, finally ended, earning massive applause.

The chorus and the stand-ins came out first, then the supporting actors, and finally, one by one, the leads. There were swoons from the younger years when Mandy, the last to come out and bow, threw herself in Justin's arms, planting a kiss on his cheek. The Duke had got his courtesan at last. He hugged her tightly, twirled her around and offered his hand to Terry, so that the three of them could thank the audience together. With a final collective bow and a polite kiss on the hand from Terry to Mandy, and another from Ernie to Lisa Turpin, who had played Nini Legs-in-the-air, the curtain finally fell.

Moulin Rouge was the talk of the school during the next few days. Terry was their new heartthrob and Mandy the younger girls' new idol. Lisa got her fair share of highly inappropriate looks from her housemates, and there were even a few fans left for Justin. Ernie shrugged off the compliments on his turn as 'just the result of very hard work', and Luna walked around serenely, as if there were no catcalls wherever she stepped. Well, she probably really didn't hear them anyway. She acknowledged a compliment only once when Ron reassured her that she had been great.

As their own performance approached, the Classics began to feel the weight of the expectations. Quidditch practice was called off. Blaise worked almost exclusively with the younger years, who were going to provide the chorus. The cast worked frenziedly on their lines, for everybody seemed to have been suddenly obliterated. Ron and the twins owed each other back and forth to sort out a few snags with the special effects.

Hermione would have had a prompt heart failure at this if she weren't so busy making up for lost time with Harry. They had a week to rehearse what she and Snape had worked on for three months. Harry didn't even have the time to be miserable.

Malfoy wasn't at all fond of their proximity, so he often joined them under the pretext that he too had to work with Harry on the Phantom's scenes with Raoul. Even Pansy and Neville had made a truce for the rehearsals' sake, though that could have been due to Blaise's exemplary lecture when they bickered for the umpteenth time in one afternoon. No-one could lecture quite as a Slytherin. The last fireworks arrived, at last, on Saturday. The twins brought them personally. They wanted to test them properly, as they were sure the prior problems had been due to Ron's lack of experience. That was all Ron needed to take it out on Nott when they interacted as Lefèvre and Reyer. It was chaos.

When the day of the performance arrived, much too swiftly for their taste, they all gathered in the Great Hall, readying the stage, checking the costumes one last time, running their lines without glancing at the script, setting the effects and having fits every five minutes.

So much so that, taking advantage of the sunny Sunday peeking at them through the windows and the enchanted ceiling, Malfoy and Harry pestered Hermione until she allowed them an hour of Quidditch practice.

She still had to tell Blaise about it, and Malfoy went with her, complaining that if he knew she would instantly let them go upon seeing Harry pout, he needn't have bothered whinging for two hours. In the meantime, Harry, also eager to actually feel the sun on his skin, made his way to the pitch, valiantly ignoring Mrs Norris' impertinent gaze as he walked along the corridors.

Malfoy arrived just after he did in a terribly bad mood. Hermione had probably voiced her opinions on their twisted priorities. Harry felt momentarily sorry for him, but they still hated each other, so he focused on flying. He almost felt as though he couldn't even pick up the broom properly any more.

They flew randomly for a bit, racing each other, attempting civilised conversation in the few moments when they weren't insulting each others' ancestors at the sight of the Snitch. Both had a good time. The prospect of the dress rehearsal made them shudder in unison.

They were unwillingly starting to think about going back inside when the Snitch twisted out of their reach and sped across the pitch at such speed that they had trouble ascertaining where it had gone. In the blink of an eye, they were running after it at the speed of lightning.

Harry, squinting against the sunlight that hit his eyes, stretched as far as he could, Malfoy mimicking his moves on his right, both reaching for the little ball that winked playfully at them, just there...

... and then Harry froze midair, his hand trembling on the broom's handle. For the first time that year, his scar had flared to life. The sunny day dimmed, giving way to a vision, a dark vision of a tall, pale man, and another one reverently on his knees. The vision was gone in a flash, but not before Harry saw the outline of the kneeling man twisting in agony, a wand pointed at him. As the man squirmed, so Harry's scar seemed to do, burning, hurting, snapping as though trying to come out of his head. The vision was gone, but Harry couldn't see the pitch. There were black spots, red spots, and white ones--the pain on his forehead blinded him, spread down his face and his neck, along his body, as if he were on fire.

A particularly harsh twinge of pain made his already fragile mind reel, and he relinquished his hold on the broom without thinking, clutching his forehead, trying to soothe the pain somehow, but it only worsened until Harry saw only black. All he felt as he fell off his broom was the cold air against his blistering skin.

A Night at the Opéra

Chapter 24 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

'Don't be so loud!' someone admonished in a whisper.

'Huh?'

'He'll wake up!'

'Won't he have to, eventually?'

There was a rustle, and then silence. Harry stirred.

'See?' the admonishing voice resumed.

"'Twas about time,' came the retort.

Harry cracked his eyes open and blinked blurrily around. The sudden sunlight hit him squarely, and he groaned in discomfort.

'Harry?' the voice asked timidly. 'Are you awake?'

Harry groaned again.

'Charming,' the other person countered.

'Stop that!'

'Sorry, should I leave you alone?'

'If you want to...!'

Harry opened his eyes tentatively and met Hermione's concerned gaze.

'Hello,' she ventured. Harry curled around himself under the blanket before focusing properly on her and answering.

'Where are we?' he asked with a yawn.

'In the hospital wing,' she answered softly. Much too softly.

'Oh?' He looked at the ceiling. 'Why?'

She looked taken aback. 'Er... Well, you... you were unwell.'

Harry grumbled against the sheet and cocked his head, realisation slowly dawning.

Hermione sighed at the change in his expression. She sat on the edge of the bed, just as he squirmed and tried to sit up.

'Harry, lie down.'

'No! He... Need to go!'

'Go where, Harry? Lie down!'

'No! I saw! He did--He... Tortured, I need, he was being tortured--'

Hermione looked worriedly around and pushed Harry firmly back onto the bed. Harry followed her gaze towards the window, from where Malfoy was eyeing them distastefully. Harry stopped squirming.

'He brought you here. You collapsed on the pitch, and he... he warned us.'

Harry thanked him awkwardly, his eyes trained on Hermione's embarrassed face.

'Don't,' Malfoy countered, walking to the door. 'She'd have killed me if I'd left you there.'

As soon as he was out the door, Harry fidgeted again.

'Let go, I need to go, need to help...' he babbled.

'Professor Snape?' Hermione finished gravely for him.

Harry froze, looking at her in horror.

'He's all right,' she reassured him, answering the unspoken question. 'He's just got back. Came to see you,' she added in a hushed tone, eyeing the door.

'All right?' Harry echoed as he sank bonelessly onto the mattress. 'Came...?'

'Well, everyone knew you were here... Everyone saw Draco arriving with you...'

'Does he know?' Harry cut her off. Hermione pursed her lips.

'Yes.'

Harry's glower nearly scorched her house badge. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

'I had to tell him, Harry!' she justified herself in despair. 'He heard you... You were feverish when you got here, and you said... things... I just had to tell him. It--it'd have been worse if I hadn't. Sorry...'

Harry snorted absently in response, too overwhelmed with the idea that Malfoy knew. So much concern, so much fear, and Malfoy, of all people, had found out...

'He promised he wouldn't tell,' she said reassuringly. Harry snorted again, covering his face. Hermione pushed his arm away slowly. 'He won't tell. Don't worry about it.'

Harry couldn't be bothered to answer that. He focused instead on what she had said earlier.

'He came to see me?' he asked, unable to prevent a smile from pulling at his lips. 'And he was all right? Not... injured?'

Hermione shrugged. 'He looked normal to me... But be quiet, no-one knows he came...'

Just as she said that, Malfoy returned, frowning at the sight of Hermione's hand on Harry's chest. The headmaster accompanied him.

'How do you feel, Harry?' he asked softly.

Harry looked severely up at him. 'How does *he* feel?'

Dumbledore sighed quietly. 'Miss Granger, Mr Malfoy, would you be so kind as to leave us alone for a moment? I believe you are expected in the Great Hall.'

'Is he still performing?' Malfoy asked, his chin pointing at Harry, who looked momentarily blank.

Hermione looked doubtful. 'I'm not sure he can...'

'Of course I can,' Harry snapped.

Hermione didn't look convinced at all. Malfoy scowled at her. 'He said he can do it, didn't he? Let's go.'

'But...'

'Let's go,' he repeated, dragging her out of the room.

Harry, looking sternly at Dumbledore, crossed his arms to indicate that he wasn't at all pleased with the company. Dumbledore heaved a sigh and sat slowly on the bed, facing him. Harry slid sideways to avoid touching him, but he didn't seem to have noticed it.

'How's he?'

'Worried about you,' Dumbledore answered sadly.

'That's not what I meant.'

'Then what is it that you meant?'

'Is he injured?' Harry ground out.

'He appears to be quite fine. Why wouldn't he be?'

Harry breathed in deeply. 'I saw him--someone being tortured today. In my mind. I thought it was him. It looked like him.'

'We gathered as much,' Dumbledore replied gravely. 'You were... somewhat vocal during your fever. As far as I know, though, Professor Snape wasn't attacked. Though he hasn't really confided in me these last few days...'

Harry crossed his arms and waited. They were finally getting to the actual point of the visit.

'I can't allow it, Harry. You do understand my reasons, don't you?'

'Yes. But I don't agree with them. I don't support them, and I don't see a point in them. I hope you understand my feelings as I understand yours.'

'I do. And I'm honestly sorry that I'm causing you pain. But I won't change my course of action,' Dumbledore said firmly.

'And how exactly will you keep us apart, Headmaster?' Harry snapped sarcastically.

'Didn't you promise to stay away?'

'Aren't you well informed?' Harry grimaced. 'When term starts, perhaps I'll delude myself into thinking that this was all a dream, but during the holidays? With just an empty castle between us? Have you ever known me to behave?'

'Yes, when the situation demands it,' Dumbledore replied very seriously. 'What will you do, sit outside his office in the vain hope that he casts you a glance?'

'Why, are you sending me to the Dursleys for Christmas--just so that I don't embarrass you both with my teenage angst?'

'If I must,' Dumbledore countered, more stony than Harry had ever seen him. 'But not because of your teenage angst.'

Harry raised an irate, enquiring eyebrow.

'You haven't understood my reasons at all,' Dumbledore continued, melancholy. 'Yours would be a delicate, controversial story at the best of times. A teacher, a student, with your backstories... No, Harry, I cannot allow it because you pose a danger to each other.'

'I pose a danger to everybody I meet.'

'Not quite in this manner. You, your feelings, may prove to be more dangerous than every peril you have faced yet. Should it ever become public that you harbour such, erm, feelings for Professor Snape, who treads a very fine line as it is, have you any idea of how that might be used to get to you--either of you?'

'I can't control my feelings, Headmaster.'

'But you can control your actions, and I expect you to do just that,' Dumbledore said firmly. His unusually stern voice echoed in the tense air between them. 'Neither you nor Professor Snape have had much happiness in your lives. I fear that I've played a part in that... And I want to prevent you, both of you, from going through unnecessary pain in the future. You still recall last year's events, of course. Distress, suffering and grief already lie ahead of us. Don't hasten them, Harry.'

Harry simply retorted that it was the *headmaster* doing that, and that he, Harry, wasn't going to sit about waiting for time to pass. He had done too much of that already.

'I'm afraid you will have to,' Dumbledore said serenely. 'Professor Snape won't be here during the holidays.'

'Sorry?'

'He's leaving again after tonight's performance.'

'Where?' Harry uttered in panic.

'Out of Hogwarts.'

Harry's eyes shot daggers at him. 'If you're doing that to keep me away from him, it's easier to just expel me.'

Dumbledore eyed Harry with something akin to pity. 'It was he who requested that I let him go.'

Harry froze mid-rant. 'Oh.'

'You don't think he's made the right decision?'

Harry grimaced up at him. 'Not really.'

After this, there wasn't much Dumbledore could say to change Harry's mind. He was on his way out when Harry addressed him again. 'Professor?'

'Yes, Harry?'

'Where's Ron?'

Professor Dumbledore looked around as though expecting Ron to Apparate between them. 'He, too, came to see you earlier today... I imagine he's rehearsing.'

'OK,' Harry replied dismissively.

'Are you quite sure you are in a condition to perform?'

'If *he* is, so am I.'

'Mr Weasley could also be attempting to murder the young man who poisoned Miss Granger's food,' Dumbledore added flatly from the door.

'Probably,' Harry agreed without listening, his mind in other things.

Dumbledore shook his head and left.

Early in the evening, Harry and Ron still hadn't exchanged a single word. The cast and crew had all gathered backstage, and Ron steadfastly refused to look at him. He stood across the stage, spoke only to Seamus and sulked in a manner reminiscent of his behaviour during Harry's first task in the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry didn't notice it at first, focused as he was on Parvati's final touches in the spectacularly over-the-top cloak he had bullied her into sewing for Firmin. Then, Blaise had announced that the audience seats were working properly and their young chorus squeaked excitedly that people were already coming in. Ron slipped to the back of Harry's mind. To his left, Lavender was wrestling Hermione's bushy hair into a tight bun similar to Ginny's. Hermione herself couldn't stop tugging at her ballerina outfit, trying to uncrease non-existent wrinkles.

Their Phantom was nowhere to be seen. He had skipped their dress rehearsal, giving way to rumours that he had dropped out. Parvati promptly denied them, informing them all that she had handed him his costume earlier in the afternoon. The avalanche of catcalls that met her words made Harry's blood boil.

Professor McGonagall, who was aging Malfoy, stepped back and recast the charm, for his hair wasn't quite right. The actors for the opening scene, the auction, fidgeted. Next to Ginny, Pansy sat very pale, quieter than she had ever been, gazing at the curtain. Neville squeezed her hand reassuringly. For once, she didn't push him away-- instead she groaned that this was going to be a disaster. Malfoy tried to look supercilious, but he, too, was visibly tense. Beside him, Dean and Ron went through a dialogue one last time.

Ron's eyes and Harry's met fleetingly. For a moment, Harry had a plain view of the glare that Ron was directing at him.

'Why's Ron acting so strange?' he whispered to Hermione.

Hermione looked frantically from side to side. 'Harry, we can't talk now! It's about to begin!'

'I just want to know why he's doing this. Is he mad at me?'

Hermione tried to wriggle out of his grasp, unsuccessfully. 'It's because of Professor Snape,' she finally said. 'He heard you speaking, and... Well, he's not stupid. He was there when I told Draco.'

Harry gripped her arm so viciously he almost broke it. 'Just so I know, did you owl the *Prophet* about it, too?'

Hermione glowered at him. 'Did you expect me to toss him out of the room after what he'd heard? That would have been even worse than just clarifying it!'

'Why didn't you tell me, at least? I knew he'd react this way, *knew* it...'

Hermione climbed up a flight of scenic wooden stairs. 'Actually, I think he was most upset because you hadn't trusted him.'

He didn't have time to answer. The wooden floor beneath them moved, and they rose high above the stage. Their plot would unfold in two stages, one level with the Great Hall's floor, one above it, so as to give the audience a bigger sense of the difference between the Opéra's stage and the Opéra's catacombs, the Phantom's territory.

Harry wanted to leave the wings and talk to Ron but he couldn't, for Ron had already taken his place centre stage for the opening scene. Harry swore under his breath, pledging to talk to him as soon as the performance was over. Now he had to concentrate. Shortly, it would be his turn on stage.

'*Sold!* Crabbe, the auctioneer, bellowed. '*Your number, sir? Thank you.*'

Ginny was there, too, a black cloak thrown over her ballerina clothes to hide them from the audience; and there was Malfoy, irrecognisable as an aged Raoul. Ginny held his arm, and Harry assumed she was playing his daughter, or perhaps his granddaughter.

'*Lot 665, ladies and gentlemen: a papier-mâché musical box, in the shape of a barrel organ...*' As Crabbe described the musical box, an enormous chandelier was pushed along the wing. '*Sold for thirty francs to the Vicomte de Chagny. Thank you, sir.*'

Draco took his time studying the box, so that there were gasps from the audience upon realising who that really was.

'*A collector's piece indeed... Every detail exactly as she said...*' he commented in a deep rumble that couldn't possibly come from Malfoy's metallic vocal cords, turning the small box between his aged fingers. '*Will you still play, when all the rest of us are dead...?*'

'*Lot 666, then,*' Crabbe continued. '*A chandelier in pieces. Some of you may recall the strange affair of the Phantom of the Opera: a mystery never fully explained.*' Harry wondered for a moment how hard Blaise and Hermione's work must have been, trying to make Crabbe sound even remotely credible. '*We are told, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the very chandelier which figures in the famous disaster.*'

He mentally scolded himself. It was almost time. He had to focus. He also had to move as far back into the wing as he could before the first of the twins' special effects came into play.

'*Perhaps we may frighten away the ghost of so many years ago with a little illumination,*' Crabbe went on sardonically. '*Gentlemen?*'

The reassembled chandelier was switched on, and Harry ran to catch up with Seamus, who had already taken his place across the stage. There was an earthshaking snap and a flash, and the monumental Overture blared so loudly that Harry could almost feel the blood in his veins pounding to the rhythm.

The chandelier rose gracefully to the stage's ceiling, all of the auction's furniture transfigured into props for a rehearsal of Chalumeau's *Hannibal*, and actors slid in and out of the wings, Ginny's cloak landing on top of Goyle and McGonagall restoring Malfoy's face to its youthful looks in the blink of an eye. Harry exchanged glances with Ron again, and this time, exceptionally, there was no hostility there. Mr Reyer and Mr Firmin had to join forces. There was a loony in their Opera house.

The Music of the Night

Chapter 25 of 25

6th year. Dumbledore has a wildly unpopular idea to improve interhouse relationships. Harry improves his relationship with a teacher instead.

There was a moment of chaos, and Harry blinked away from Ron. This sequence hadn't been thoroughly rehearsed. Everyone appeared to take their assigned positions with relative ease, Harry dodging Ron's overcoat, which flew backstage over Dean's head. The *Overture* blared its final notes. It was almost time to come in.

'This trophy from our saviours, from the enslaving force of Rome!' Pansy, or rather, Carlotta, or rather, Elissa, Queen of Carthage, took the spotlight, smiling in delight at Hermione and Ginny, who played her two leading slave girls. In the wings, just behind Harry, Lavender grimaced at the hideous severed head that Pansy carried. Because Ron had absolutely refused to allow a shrieking, bleeding head in a Muggle production, the twins had decided to make it as realistic as possible. Harry thought that it bore a remarkable resemblance to Dolores Umbridge.

Parvati, Crabbe and a great deal of people stepped onstage, pretending to be members of the crew working on the *Hannibal* set. From the wings, their chorus sang along with Carlotta.

'Hear the drums--Hannibal comes!

It was Neville's cue. He silently recommended his soul to Merlin and began, with an extremely exaggerated Italian accent, *'Sad to return to find the land we love threatened once more by Roma's far-reaching grasp.'*

To his right, there was a loud groan, and Ron emerged from a "rehearsing" group. *'Signor... If you please: "Rome". We say "Rome", not "Roma".'*

He turned his back to Neville momentarily to eye the audience with an aghast expression. His charmingly dishevelled looks, coupled with his half-open shirt and the rolled-up sleeves, drew more than one sigh from the girls in the audience.

'Si, si, Rome, not Roma. It's very hard for me, Neville stammered, murmuring to himself, *'Rome... Rome...'*

Harry's breath caught. It was his turn. He exchanged glances with Seamus and both followed Nott onstage, to be introduced to the crew.

'Gentlemen, please!' McGonagall snapped, banging a cane inches from Seamus' feet. *'If you would kindly move to one side?'*

'Madame Giry, our ballet mistress.' Nott grimaced. *'I don't mind confessing, M. Firmin, I shan't be sorry to be rid of the whole blessed business.'*

'I keep asking you, Monsieur, why exactly are you retiring?' Harry had to force himself not to try and spot the reason lurking from the wings. *Where was he?*

Nott ignored the question. *'We take particular pride here in the excellence of our ballets.'* Ginny stepped downstage, whirling through the dancers. *'Meg Giry. Mme. Giry's daughter. Promising dancer, M. André, most promising.'*

Hermione then took the spotlight, promptly falling out of step and eliciting another snap from McGonagall, *'You! Christine Daaé! Concentrate, girl!'*

Just as Carlotta sang *Think of Me*, a backdrop crashed ominously to the floor, hiding Hermione from sight. *'He's here, the Phantom of the Opera... He is with us--it's the ghost...'* Ginny and the chorus sang darkly.

Neville glared at Ginny and ran to Pansy. *'You idiots! Cara! Cara! Are you hurt?'*

Holding a noose-like length of rope, Dean, or rather Buquet, the stagehand, claimed that it was not his fault, that he wasn't even at his post, and that if there was anyone there, then Messieurs, it must have been a ghost...

'He's here, the Phantom of the Opera...' Ginny echoed. This time, it was Seamus who glared at her.

'Good heavens! Will you show a little courtesy?'

'Mademoiselle, please!' Harry added.

'These things do happen,' Seamus continued. Pansy turned on him.

'Si! These "tings" do appen! Well, until you stop these "tings" happening, this "ting" does not appen! UbaldoAndiamo!'

Neville followed her obediently, muttering, *'Amateurs.'*

'I don't think there's much more to assist you, gentlemen. Good luck. If you need me, I shall be in Frankfurt.' Nott swiftly excused himself.

Harry couldn't let his mind drift. Firmin should be a nervous wreck during Hermione's upcoming *Think of Me*. *'André, this is doing nothing for my nerves!'*

Everything was carefully set for Hermione to change discreetly into a gala gown mid-song, symbolising the passage from rehearsals to performance. It was the first 'real' number, and she was extremely nervous. Much to her delight, when she finished, the 'Bravos!' came not only from the characters, but also from the real audience. Ron granted her Reyer's stiff appraisal.

'Yes, you did well. He will be pleased,' Mme. Giry said. *'And you! You were a disgrace tonight! Here--we rehearse. Now!'* She pointed her cane at the dancers.

In the wings, Harry's heart had almost stopped with the anticipation of the next line.

'*Bravi, bravi, bravissimi...*' intoned a deep voice offstage, across from Harry. Both Hermione, onstage, and Harry, off, jumped out of their skin. Harry looked around spasmodically.

Hermione sat at her dressing table, talking to Ginny. *Here in this room he calls me softly..!*

'Did she enhance her voice, after all?' Seamus asked, but Harry, still squinting at the darkness, didn't hear him.

'*Somehow I know he's always with me... He, the unseen genius...*'

Ginny placed a hand on her shoulder. '*Christine, you must have been dreaming...*'

Hermione glanced away from her, lost in thought. '*Angel of Music! Guide and guardian! Grant to me your glory!*'

'*Who is this angel? This...*'

'*Angel of Music! Hide no longer! Secret and strange angel!*'

Harry jerked when he felt a jab on his back. It was Ron, glaring at him. 'Some discretion, OK?'

'*He's with me, even now...*'

'I'm not onstage.' Harry glowered. 'But you should be,' he gritted out towards Ron's retreating back. 'Git...'

'*Your hands are cold...*' Ginny crouched beside Hermione.

'*All around me...*'

'*Your face, Christine, it's white...*'

'*It frightens me...*' Hermione looked up tearfully.

'*Don't be frightened...*' Ginny retorted, interrupted by a raging Mme. Giry, who demanded that she join the others in rehearsal.

Harry hurried through the wings, looking for the bottle of champagne that he had to carry onstage. Seamus was already on his way there.

'*What a relief!*' Harry swung his long overcoat and raised his eyes to the ceiling. '*Not a single refund!*'

'*Greedy.*' Lavender squeezed his arm. She had a bit part as Firmin's wife.

'*Gentlemen, if you wouldn't mind,*' Draco calmly took the champagne from Harry's hands, '*this is one visit I should prefer to make unaccompanied.*'

'*They appear to have met before...*' Harry commented knowingly, almost bouncing offstage as Christine and Raoul reunited in her dressing room. As they launched into the *Little Lotte* sequence, he frantically searched for a good place to observe the next scene.

'Careful, Harry, the floor's about to move again,' Ginny reminded him.

'*I shan't keep you late!*' Malfoy promised when Hermione refused to have supper with him. The Angel of Music was strict.

'*No, Raoul...*'

'*You must change. I must get my hat. Two minutes--Little Lotte!*' He sprinted offstage.

'*Things have changed, Raoul,*' she said thoughtfully. Harry stood as close as he could to the large mirror that hid the secret passage to the Phantom's lair.

'*Insolent boy!*' a voice snarled from behind it, but Harry couldn't spot the body to which it belonged even if he craned his neck until it almost snapped. '*Ignorant fool! This brave young suitor, sharing in my triumph!*'

'*Angel! I hear you! Speak--I listen...*' Hermione pleaded, her eyes roaming the empty room in confusion. '*My soul was weak--forgive me... enter at last, Master!*'

'*Flattering child, you shall know me,*' her Master's voice took on an amused tone. Harry wondered if the audience had recognised it already. '*Look at your face in the mirror--I am there, inside!*'

The lights dimmed around Hermione, and the mirror shone. A dark figure rose behind it. In his hurry to see it more clearly, Harry almost fell onto the stage.

'*Angel of Music! Hide no longer! Come to me, strange angel...*'

Malfoy returned onstage, extending his hand to the doorknob and freezing upon hearing two voices. When again he tried to open the door, it was locked. '*Whose is that voice...? Who is that in there...?*'

Watching from the wings, behind the Phantom, Ron burst with pride at the twins' work. The mirror slid down, revealing a darkly attired man behind whom a bright light shimmered. The floor creaked.

'*I am your Angel of Music... Come to me, Angel of Music...*' the Phantom repeated, grasping Hermione's wrist. Hermione winced to indicate that the touch was cold but not forceful. She walked through the mirror, and it slid back into place, just as a puzzled Raoul entered the room.

The lights blacked out around him, and the floor where he stood heaved, making Harry stagger in the wing. The other half of the stage descended to floor level. There, the Phantom and Christine ran hurriedly on and offstage. Mist and candles rose from the floor surrounding them, and the lights took on a blueish hue. A boat came into view and they climbed onto it. Malfoy had already stepped offstage, and that side, too, descended, the special effects encompassing the whole stage now. The first bars of the Phantom's song thundered around them.

The Phantom was clearly visible for the first time. A shiver rippled through Harry's skin as he mouthed the line, '*My power over you grows stronger yet... And though you turn from me to glance behind...*'

Hermione did indeed fidget and look around in doubt.

'*The Phantom of the Opera is there, inside your mind...*' the Phantom added, looming over Hermione, whose expression softened again.

'... my mind...' she sang along.

Offstage, the chorus added an edge to that peculiar love song. The Phantom approached Christine from behind, and breathed down her neck, never actually touching her. *'You always knew that man and mystery...'*

'Were both in you...' Harry murmured.

Answering Seamus' doubts, Hermione finished with a cadenza that her real voice could never have achieved. It was chilling to see her raise her eyes to the ceiling, singing under her Master's command. The audience burst into an unexpected applause. Thankfully, onstage stood the two members of the cast who were least likely to slip out of character.

The Phantom's lair was sliding onstage and, in the ensuing mess, Harry spotted Ron and Malfoy talking quietly in the far corner of the wing. He made his way towards them with a scowl.

'Well, you know I've got my hands tied, but it's not like I'll stop you... Go ahead,' Malfoy said.

'... I'd like to see you try.'

'Hell, kill him, for all I care...'

'Excuse me,' Harry snapped. 'I need a word with you, Ron.'

Ron glared at him. Malfoy turned away to have a look at Hermione, tossing over his shoulder, 'Don't let me get in the way of the lovebirds...'

Ron wanted to retort, but Harry pulled him further back into the wing. 'You glared at me all day. I've had enough. Spit it out or look elsewhere.'

'I don't owe you any explanations on how I look at you,' Ron countered coldly. 'And you might want to lower your voice. There's a play going on beyond the drapery. Oh, but wait, you'd know that--the boyfriend's there...'

'Are you afraid it's contagious?' Harry snapped. 'That because I fancy him you'll suddenly want to be the Quidditch team's bicycle?'

He regretted his words instantly. He expected a fist to connect with his face at any instant, but Ron simply stared at him.

'Is this his work?' he finally replied. 'Are you turning into him, or are you just thick?'

Onstage, Hermione faced a mirror. Her reflection wore a wedding gown. The image extended its arms through the mirror, towards her, and Christine fainted amidst shrieks from the youngest in the audience. The Phantom picked her up and carried her tenderly to bed. *'You alone can make my song take flight--help me make the music of the night...'*

Harry gazed unblinkingly at the scene. Ron cringed at the words.

'I could have made a worse choice,' Harry mused, still looking at the stage.

Ron eyed him doubtfully, and he focused on the conversation.

'So, is it contagious? Feeling tingly already?'

'It's got nothing to do with that,' Ron replied evenly.

'Then, what?' Harry snapped in a whisper.

'How long has it been going on?'

Harry shook his head at the change of subject. 'Just... a little over a week ago.' Ron nodded absently. Harry thought that he might as well be completely honest. 'I've fancied him for months, though.'

Hermione had managed to peel off the Phantom's mask, and she was currently squirming away from him, looking up in terror. He stood in profile, so that the audience saw nothing unusual, but both Christine and the wing-bound cast had a clear look at what lay beneath the mask. Ron squinted and Harry, following his gaze, felt slightly ill at the sight of the Phantom's horribly deformed face.

There was absolute silence from everyone as the Phantom roared, *'Damn you! You little prying Pandora!* He kneeled before Christine to give her a good look at his face. She retreated further, trembling from head to toe. Hermione and Harry had practiced this scene at great length.

'Damn you! Curse you! The words echoed around Hermione, who now looked petrified with fear.

'You've fancied that?' Ron muttered absentmindedly.

What could Harry say to that? That there was a difference between the actor and the character? Ron already knew that. That was not what upset him.

'Can you even dare to look, or bear to think of me?' the Phantom began, now in a strangely subdued tone.

The silence between them stretched to an uncomfortable extent as Harry tried to figure out what he could possibly say that was sufficiently effective to make Ron stop looking at him with such disappointment. *Stranger Than You Dreamt It* only banked him three minutes before he had to run to the wing across from them.

'Fear can turn to love, you'll learn to see, to find the man behind the monster...'

Even in the dim light, Ron was visibly paling as the words reached them. Dean broke their silence. The length of rope in his hands twisted into a lasso, he brought their attention back to the performance by squeezing himself between them with a muttered, 'Let me through, let me through.'

'Come, we must return, these two fools who run my theatre will be missing you, the Phantom snapped, dragging Christine offstage. Harry tried to figure out where they had gone, but the stage was shifting again, and he had to jump out of its way. In the meantime, Ron had taken his leave, and Dean was already halfway through his song. Harry had to go.

'You must be always on your guard, Dean said morbidly, exhibiting himself to the ballet girls. He slipped the rope around his neck and then his hand in between, pulling the rope taut without harming himself. *'Or he will catch you with his magical lasso!'*

An open trap appeared centre-stage, and the Phantom emerged, holding Christine under his cloak and gazing at Buquet. The ballet girls fled in fear. The gloomy pair crossed the stage silently and left. McGonagall told Dean off for taunting the ghost. It was Harry's cue.

'Joseph Buquet, hold your tongue--he will burn you with the heat of his eyes...'

'Sad news on soprano scene,' Harry sighed, flipping nervously through the newspapers he carried. Seamus burst in, nervous to no end, and both had a hard time containing their laughter as they commented on the letters that the Phantom had sent them. For some reason, they had never quite managed to work on this scene without laughing.

'In addition, he wants money!'

'He's a funny sort of spectre...'

'... to expect a large retainer!'

Prima Donna was an extremely long, elaborate scene which required the presence of almost everyone--except, ironically, for the people Harry most desperately wanted to meet. Pansy simply glowed. This was Carlotta's brightest moment, and Harry was bitterly reminded of the numerous rehearsals in which she steadfastly refused to work, whinging and snivelling that they weren't showing Carlotta the sort of slobbering submission she expected.

Harry added a silent, 'Please, no,' to the booming, '*Once more!*' that signalled the end of the sequence, and the stage was set for a performance of Albrizzio's *Il Muto*. Backstage, Hermione dressed as a boy to play Serafimo, Carlotta's lover in the show, and Parvati helped her adjust a maid's outfit over the many layers of fabric. Serafimo's liaison with the Countess must be hidden from her husband.

Pansy presented the audience with a spectacular cadenza that, apparently, only the Phantom disliked.

'Did I not instruct that Box Five was to be kept empty?' he roared above the music. Harry, Seamus and Malfoy, sitting in Box Five, stopped chortling and glared at the source of the voice.

'It's him... I know it... It's him...' Hermione said tremulously.

'Your part is silent, little toad!' Pansy hissed.

'A toad, Madame? Perhaps it is you who are the toad...' the Phantom retorted malevolently.

Pansy held her head high and turned to Hermione. '*Serafimo, away with this pretense, you cannot speak, but kiss me in my-eroak!*'

There was stunned silence. She cleared her throat quietly and tried again, managing a set of croaks in several octaves. As she despairingly tried to utter '*in my husband's absence*' in her perfect soprano, the Phantom started to laugh. Just a snigger at first, then a resounding laugh that echoed along the walls.

'Behold! She's singing to bring down the chandelier!' he jested cruelly, laughter booming above their heads.

'*Non posso più... I cannot... I cannot go on...*' Carlotta moaned pitifully, her words supported by the chandelier, which blinked and swayed ominously. Neville ushered her offstage. As soon as she set foot in the wings, Pansy complained that those rasping sounds had probably ruined her voice for good.

'*Maestro--the ballet--now!*' Seamus clipped out. The soft tune of the *Dance of the Country Nymphs* filled the stage. A bright light filtered through the backdrop, treating the audience to the Phantom's shadow, cast ominously over the dancers, closer and closer. As it filled the length of the backdrop, Ginny let out a blood-curling scream that made more than one audience member jump. The body of Joseph Buquet, garrotted by his own lasso, hung from the ceiling and fell onto the stage. A quiet flurry of cushioning charms flew in from the wings to ensure that Dean wouldn't be hurt.

The sight of the dead body sent cast and audience into a panic, and provided Malfoy and Hermione with an excuse to run to the roof *foAll I Ask of You*. It also allowed Harry to go gratefully back to Ron, who had followed the events from the right wing. He nodded at Harry in acknowledgement. Harry waited, letting him lead the conversation.

'Did you, huh... You know. Did you?' Ron looked like he couldn't believe his own words.

Harry thought for a moment and nodded. There was no reason to hide that from Ron now.

'Does Dumbledore know?' Ron snorted in response to his own question. 'Of course he does. He knows everything. What did he say?'

'He disapproves. And he's sending him away.'

'He would.'

Harry didn't like the hollow note in Ron's voice. His quiet tone was more worrying than anything else. Ron was only quiet when he was ferociously angry.

'Who knew?' Ron then enquired. 'Other than Hermione and Dumbledore?'

'No-one,' Harry answered truthfully. Ron raised his brow doubtfully. 'People suspected, but no-one really knew.'

'Who suspected?'

Harry thought for a moment. 'Ginny and Seamus, I suppose... And Malfoy, but he thought I was having a fling with Hermione. Blaise, too. Pansy definitely noticed something strange.' Listing the names felt a bit like stripping naked. Looking at it this way, his secret sounded very, very public.

'That's... a lot of people.'

'Yeah... but no-one really *knew* anything,' Harry reminded him. 'Even Dumbledore was only informed, er, later on.'

'I never suspected,' Ron mused aloud. 'Not once.'

'Yes, you did,' Harry countered.

'That was only because I thought he was... He wasn't, was he?'

Harry shook his head negatively.

'I never suspected,' Ron repeated absently. 'I always thought we were good enough friends that you'd tell me if something as important as this happened to you.'

'We--we are!'

Ron's voice shook ever so slightly. 'But when you had to tell someone, you told Hermione.'

'You will curse the day you did not do all that the Phantom asked of you!' the Phantom bellowed from well above the stage. The chandelier fell, smashing just an inch from Hermione's feet. Intermission.

Harry and Ron had to change, as well as help with the stage for *Masquerade*, so there was no more time to talk. But at least now Harry knew where he stood with Ron. He would try to reach him during Scene Four. Beforehand, good Merlin, he had to dance.

He and Seamus wore matching skeleton outfits and opera cloaks. '*M'sieur Firmin?*'

'*M'sieur André?*' Seamus took off his mask and grinned. Around them, a sea of colourful fabric flooded the stage, celebrating six months without news of the Phantom. To the left, Raoul placed a gold chain with an engagement ring around Christine's neck, though she was reluctant to accept it.

'Wait till the time is right...'

'When will that be? It's an engagement, not a crime!' he pleaded.

She squirmed her way through an acceptance, and they joined the ensemble, dancing giddily to their happiness.

'*Masquerade! Take your fill--let the spectacle astound you!*' the crowd echoed.

A chilled silence fell when a figure dressed head to toe in crimson and wearing a death's head as a mask appeared at the top of the staircase, descending frostily towards the ball guests, tossing the manuscript of *Don Juan Triumphant* at Seamus and beckoning Christine closer.

The Phantom jumped over the last steps, landed next to the directors and walked towards Christine, his gloved hand brushing Harry's for a second. Harry's head jerked and he almost fell out of character at the only acknowledgement he had received from him all night, but the Phantom gazed coldly at him through the skull, and Harry refocused. He moved mechanically throughout the rest of the sequence.

Harry tapped his foot in impatience as Neville uselessly struggled to get '*Those who tangle with Don Juan*' right, so that Ron could stop instructing him and return backstage. He had completely forgot that Ron was part of Scene Four.

Hermione walked past him in a flowing gown. Its silver embroidery translated the refrain of *All I Ask of You* into Ancient Runes. It had been Malfoy's idea, she told him. She walked solemnly upstage and entered a cemetery. The Phantom, Harry knew, lurked in the shadows.

'I was afraid,' he blurted out as soon as Ron walked offstage. Ron, still musing over Reyer's lines, frowned incomprehendingly. 'I was afraid of your reaction.'

'Sure. Hermione's the mature one. I'd have told her instead of telling me, too,' Ron grumbled.

'I didn't mean to tell her--or anyone. It just... happened. And we were both so worried that you might react badly--'

'That's the thing,' Ron said bitterly. 'Perhaps you didn't *mean* to tell her, but once you did, you chose to keep me in the dark. You didn't keep it to yourself--you just kept it from me.'

'I was worried.' Harry gulped. 'I was worried that I might have to choose between you and him.'

Ron swore so loudly that McGonagall, sitting across from them, had a murderous glance around.

'You thought I'd make you choose?'

Harry looked down as Ron's anger finally erupted. Nearby, Malfoy glowered at the noise they made.

'If that's what you think of me,' Ron finished, breathless with the effort to let out a record number of words in such little time, 'it's really no wonder you didn't want to tell me, isn't it?'

'Ron, I...'

'Of course I wouldn't react well! It's Snape, what did you think? Just last year, we were teasing each other about girls, trying to ask them out without making asses of ourselves, and now... Did you think I was going to congratulate you?'

'No, that's why I didn't tell you!' Harry hissed. Silence fell. 'I'm sorry,' he eventually added.

'I wouldn't have made you choose,' Ron mumbled. 'I didn't like it when you dated the Chang sniffer, but I didn't make you choose between us. And if you'd actually told me you... liked... *him*... I wouldn't have made you choose, either. I'm not a complete idiot.'

'I'm sorry,' Harry repeated.

'Yeah,' Ron uttered, gazing back at the stage. 'You should be.'

'*Try to forgive, teach me to live, give me the strength to try..!*' Hermione sang softly.

'Why do you like him?' Ron asked at last.

Harry froze. He hadn't really had the chance to wonder about that. It seemed to have just... happened. Somehow, though, he knew that saying that wouldn't give Ron the best impression.

'He's a good singer, I guess?' he answered tentatively.

Ron smirked. After a second, Harry grinned.

After making up with Ron, time flew by. Harry felt much lighter. Ron told him how the twins had come up with the fireballs that the Phantom was currently tossing at Raoul, and how they had prepared an extra stage for the climactic explosion while Harry was in the hospital wing. Harry's mind couldn't be further away from the machinery, but still he listened attentively to all that Ron had to say. Everything was always so much more fun when Ron was around.

The climax approached. The stage was set for the performance of the Phantom's opera. Ginny danced coquettishly for Neville's Don Juan. He threw her a coin purse before being whisked offstage and immediately replaced by the Phantom, who sang heartbreakingly of loneliness with Christine. When Hermione serenely raised her hand and whipped off his mask, showing his face plainly to the horrified audience, he wrapped her in his cloak and they vanished. The rest of the cast waited with bated breath, for this was a tricky sequence.

Fire licked at the scenery, the spare stage that had been brought up turned to coal, and Neville's, Piangi's, body was brought forth, garrotted in the same manner as Buquet's, making Pansy burst into a bout of hysterics.

'You! Why did you let this happen?' she shouted at Seamus while Neville was quietly carried away and Harry moaned their disgrace.

The stage shifted again as Mme. Giry firmly told Meg that no, she couldn't accompany Raoul to the catacombs, where, as the audience could see, the Phantom had already arrived with a terrified Christine.

'Track down this murderer, he must be found! a mob clamoured. 'Hunt down this animal, who runs to ground!'

Mme. Giry gave her last directions to Raoul, instructing him to keep his hand at the level of his eyes, and he made his way to the lair alone.

'Too long he's preyed on us--but now we know; the Phantom of the Opera is there, deep down, below...'

Hermione looked at the Opera Ghost with an incomparable coldness. *'Have you gorged yourself at last in your lust for blood?'* The Phantom remained silent. *'Am I now to be prey to your lust for flesh?'*

'That fate, which condemns me to wallow in blood, has also denied me the joys of the flesh...' he explained softly. *'This face--the infection that poisons our love...'* He walked to a dummy dressed in a wedding gown and took its veil, shoving it into Hermione's hands. She listened to his self-pitying words unwaveringly.

'This haunted face holds no horror for me now... It's in your soul that the true distortion lies...'

There was nary a sound from the audience when the Phantom realised that they had an unexpected guest. But there were gasps when the Phantom tied Raoul as though he meant to hang him. Harry and Ron couldn't help but smile. Never before had their Potions master mistreated his precious Draco.

'Angel of Music, when will you see reason...?' Christine muttered, as they went on and on about their love for her. *'Angel of Music...'*

'You've passed the point of no return...' he assured her.

'You deceived me--I gave my mind blindly...' she finished sadly.

'You try my patience! Make your choice!'

Hermione had the foresight of letting the words echo for a second before approaching him. Everybody's attention had to be on her actions rather than the lyrics.

'God give me courage to show you...' she sang as she approached him. *'You are not alone...'*

Reaching him, she looked up, and he lowered his head. Backstage, and in spite of himself, Harry looked the other way. He had to focus on them again when he felt Ron pulling madly at his sleeve, and his chin dropped. They were kissing. Really kissing. Holding each other, their lips touching. Squinting, he thought he could see a bit of tongue. Even Malfoy looked shocked.

The silence when they broke apart was deathly. A second later, the chorus burst into song. *'Track down this murderer--he must be found! Hunt down this animal...'*

Onstage, after a short deliberation, the Phantom released the two lovers, accepting at last that his passion was unrequited. As they gratefully rushed to the boat, he looked at his mask, and the music box started playing. He sang along melancholically, holding onto the ring that he had given Christine, and which she had given him back before leaving with Raoul.

The mob neared. He wrapped himself in his cloak and disappeared. How much work Flitwick had put into those Disillusionment Charms, they did not know, but they were certainly effective. When the rest of the cast burst into the Phantom's only home, they found nothing but his mask. Ginny held it in the light, and the curtain fell.

A split second later, the audience stood, applauding heartily. The cast reappeared, led by the chorus and the extras. Harry and Seamus came out together after Ron, and Pansy followed, receiving the loudest applause so far. Malfoy got catcalls and whistles on top of the clapping. Same for Hermione. At Parvati's signal, they stepped aside. The Phantom was walking downstage. He hadn't reversed the spell that deformed his face. The applause was sparse and reluctant. Hermione walked up to him and he bowed to kiss her hand.

As though it had been rehearsed, the crowd exploded in a thunderous ovation. Cast and crew held hands for the final bow. The Phantom stood in the middle, holding nobody's hand, with Hermione to his right and Malfoy to his left. As they approached, he took their hands and held them together, stepping back. When the crowd blinked, he was no longer there.

The applause redoubled, and Ron quietly broke the line to pull Harry into the nearest wing.

'Hey, that's my husband!' Lavender playfully piped in.

'Shut up, Lavender.' Ron turned to Harry in a whisper, 'He's leaving, you said? Then you can't waste time bowing to these people. Hurry up.'

'Hurry... No! Are you mad? I don't want to go there!'

'Of course you do,' Ron countered, dragging him along the deserted corridor. 'Do you think I'm doing this because *like* it?'

Onstage, after three curtain calls, Malfoy was ranting at Hermione for the kiss she had shared with his Head of house.

'Professor Snape and I just thought that we had to do something to match the show that the Bohemians put on.'

'And of course, kissing was the logical course of action.'

'It did cause a bit of a commotion, didn't it?' She smiled sweetly, holding his hand for a final bow as the crowd began to stand.

Harry and Ron had already reached the dungeons.

'Ron, I don't even... How do we even know he's here?'

Ron banged on the door. 'Where'd he go dressed like that? Have a pint at the Three Broomsticks?'

They waited. There was no answer.

'Just to be clear, I don't agree with this,' Ron grumbled irritably.

A different matter flitted into Harry's mind. 'Who were you going to kill? It wasn't me, was it?'

Ron froze with his fist in the air. 'No-one...?'

'You were talking about it with Malfoy.'

Ron frowned, deep in thought. 'Oh, right. We were... just talking about giving Nott a lesson.'

'Nott?'

Ron stared at him for a moment. 'Right, you were in the hospital wing when Dumbledore told us... It was Nott who tampered with Hermione's food. Dumbledore's made him follow her everywhere now--do her bidding, carry her stuff... Like a personal valet. For the whole term! I love Dumbledore,' he finished brightly, banging on the door again. It flung open.

'Do you want to bring down my door, Weasley?'

'I have a Christmas present for you,' Ron countered coldly. 'And I'll search him for injuries when he goes back upstairs, so you want to be careful,' he added before turning on his heel and leaving them alone.

'You have a peculiar set of friends.' Severus uttered, gazing at the empty corridor. He had already changed out of the Phantom's costume.

'Yeah,' Harry replied. He stepped inside the familiar office quietly, not sure of what to say next.

Severus closed the door carelessly and turned to look at him. 'I take it he, too, already knows.'

'Yeah... But I didn't tell him--'

'It doesn't matter. It was a matter of time before Miss Granger told *him*, too.'

Harry stared at him, earnestly searching for words. Ultimately, he opted for, 'You were great.'

'You weren't,' Severus countered plainly. 'You were terrible.'

'No, I wasn't,' Harry replied with a small smile.

'No,' Severus quietly conceded. 'Not quite. But you already know that.'

'Yeah...'

'Then, why are you here?'

Harry hesitated. 'Ron dragged me.'

'Why would he do that?'

'I suppose he was trying to be useful.'

'How useful?' Severus asked pointedly.

'May we go to your bedroom?' Harry blurted out.

'No.'

'I won't discuss this here, as if we're talking about a school assignment!' Harry barked. He really had no ulterior motives.

Seconds dripped by, and to his surprise, Severus turned, leading him silently to his private quarters. Harry sat on the very edge of the bed, taking a proper look around for the first time as Severus warded the door heavily enough to keep even Peeves out. Not that he would have dared disturb one of the Bloody Baron's Slytherins in his own quarters.

It was a rather spartan room, much like its inhabitant. It was a far cry from Harry's own bright, noisy, happy dormitory. But that mattered very little. One of his most precious memories had taken place there. He looked down at Firmin's formal shoes, again searching for words.

'Before you speak, there is something I need to know.'

Harry looked up. He was always the one who asked questions. 'What is it?'

'Are these nightly visits of yours going to become a habit?'

Harry focused on his shoes again, his answer barely audible. 'And if they do?'

'Then I'll have to move to another room and make sure you don't know its location.'

A tense silence followed. Harry had hoped that they would eventually maintain a conversation that wasn't broken by these uncomfortable silences. It looked unlikely.

'You didn't want to have to see me when you came back,' he eventually retorted, echoing Severus' words of just a few days ago.

'How kind of you to remember.'

'Then why did you visit me in the hospital wing?'

'I'm going to rip out Miss Granger's tongue,' was the unfazed reply.

'Why did you touch me onstage?' Harry murmured. 'Why won't you make it easier for me and let me hate you?'

'Do you want me to?'

Harry looked up again. Severus' face was inscrutable. 'No,' he breathed out, countering his own request.

'Potter.' He gazed at Severus. He had always been *Potter* for him. Even now, he was Potter--perhaps specially now. Harry was surprised to realise how little it mattered to him, how the developments had led him to a position where a snarled, 'Potter' was an acceptable substitute for the name that defined *him*, his individuality and his worth. 'Potter.'

He jolted back to reality. 'Yes?'

Severus took one step towards him but froze, as though wary of the teenager huddled on his bed. 'I haven't changed. You've known me for six years, you've loathed me for six years. I'm still that person. I don't even understand what prompted you to change--'

'You've never asked what I saw in you,' Harry cut him off. 'You just waited until I could see it.'

What a highly romanticised version of the events. Harry didn't know why his feelings had changed so dramatically either, but contrary to everybody else, he couldn't be less invested in finding out. Considering all doors were closing on him, introspection seemed to be a useless effort.

'You were right,' Harry said at last. 'I didn't know what I was asking for.'

Another of those unbearable silences followed.

'It couldn't have ended differently.'

'I--I know where I stand with you,' Harry tried desperately, one last attempt. 'We could--'

'No. We couldn't.'

'It could work. I could control myself.'

'There's a tiny room adjacent to the Great Hall bearing witness to the fact that I don't always control myself.'

'I wouldn't mi--'

'I would.'

Harry resisted the urge to bury his head in his hands with great difficulty.

'I must go now,' Severus reminded him.

'Let me stay,' Harry whispered. His head was heavy.

'Potter...'

'Just for a bit,' Harry muttered almost inaudibly.

'I really must go.'

'I won't be here again. Give me just a moment.'

Severus relented, heaving a deep sigh. Harry gazed vacantly at the walls for minutes on end. It was a good pretext to keep them in the same room for a bit longer. But they would eventually have to leave, and it would be irreversible...

'Would you do something else for me?'

'And then you'll leave?'

Harry hesitated for a tiny moment, but then he nodded.

'What is it?'

'Will you sing for me?'

Severus did a double take. 'That's a completely silly idea.'

'Nobody's ever sung for me.' It was the cheapest of blows, it reeked of a need beyond even that of which Severus had once accused him, but Harry knew that it was also his best argument. *I fell for you when I heard you sing* was just too laughable to be voiced. 'And I'd like to hear you sing again. Just a few bars...'

'Sing what?' Severus rather looked like he couldn't believe his own words.

Harry's choice had been made months ago. *Only then can you belong to me...* he intoned with a sad smile.

Severus seemed to be repressing a snort, but eventually, the lowest of low voices reached Harry's ears. 'Don't be here when I come back.'

Harry nodded with his eyes closed, waiting for the next words, which he was now sure would come.

'Let the dream begin, let your darker side give in, to the power of the music...'

'... of the night,' Harry mouthed along. He opened his eyes. Severus had approached him. He kneeled before Harry, scanning his face for reactions. It had all begun this way--with Severus kneeling concernedly beside him, his brow set and his wand drawn.

'Don't Oblivate me,' Harry murmured.

Severus considered his wand and Harry's face for a moment. Then he hoisted himself up just a bit, just so could be at eye level with Harry. Harry closed his eyes, repressing a gulp.

There was a faint, yet lingering brush of lips against his forehead. Harry's eyes flew open again. A kiss. A chaste, tender kiss, unlike any that they had shared. Their parting kiss, at last.

Severus didn't look away as he raised his wand and whispered, *Nox.*

'You alone can make my song take flight; it's over now, the music of the night...'

And their show, too, was now over.

THE END